

Bear Mountain Road

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Bear Mountain Road

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Summary

Hannibal runs afoul of a clan of hillbilly mountain cannibals, and finds his only hope of survival to be contingent upon winning the aid of the family's two children - Will, and his little brother, D.

Or - An Adoption Story.

(While this AU is inspired by the horror film "Wrong Turn," it is absolutely not necessary that you watch it in order to understand/enjoy this story).

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chilton pumps the Jaguar XK's brakes, rolling to a halt behind a bread truck, and sticks his head out the window to stare around it at the traffic jam. From his vantage point at the crest of the hill he can see the lines of stalled vehicles, running out on the curving tree-lined Appalachian highway for as far as his eyes can see.

Looking down at his phone in a vain hope of finally getting a signal and therefore ascertaining how long he can expect to be trapped here, Chilton sees that he still has zero bars.

Tossing the phone onto the passenger seat disgustedly, Chilton puts the convertible into park and steps out onto the highway, walking between the shuddering big rigs.

A man's sunburned arm is hooked out the window of the truck ahead of him, and Chilton stops in front of it and says, "Have you got any idea what's going on down there?"

The man turns his head to look down at Chilton. From his expression, it is clear that he is unimpressed by what he sees, but Chilton has no intention of allowing himself to be intimidated by the roughneck.

"Trailer jackknifed about five miles up the road," he tells Chilton. "Spilled chemicals and shit all over the place."

"How long is it going to take to clean up?"

"Couple hours."

"A couple of hours?" Chilton repeats.

"Couple hours at least."

"That's absurd. I need to get to Raleigh this evening."

"You in a hurry?"

"I have a ticket for the symphony."

He sees the trucker clock that, and the sudden shame is like acid reflux in the back of his throat. Trying to regain lost ground he'd never held in the first place, Chilton lifts his chin and says, "Michal Nesterowicz is conducting selections from Scheherazade.

"I'm meeting some colleagues at the performance," he continues, though this is a lie; Hannibal and Alana both had politely declined his invitation that they join him, offering the excuse that they intended to leave the next morning rather than today. Alana's rejection had

been tinged by pity, but Hannibal was maddently polite. Chilton still isn't sure which rankled more.

"And then tomorrow afternoon I'll be speaking at an extremely prestigious psychiatric conference."

"Huh," the trucker says. "Alright."

"So what you ought to do is get back in your car..." he draws out slowly.

"Yes, and?"

"...and fuck off."

Chilton turns and walks quickly back to his car, scared but trying to pretend that he isn't. Once he is safely behind the wheel again he scoffs at the memory of the trucker.

His hands twitch as he grasps the wheel, and he looks around at all the idling cars surrounding him, and then eases his way into the breakdown lane to cruise at an breezy pace past all the schlubs still waiting for the traffic jam to clear.

Half a mile later Chilton notices a turn-off onto a gravel road, and takes it.

Trees crowd in around the narrow one-lane path, and the gravel road is littered with potholes, but at least now he feels as though he might be making some kind of progress - that he has left the feckless masses behind and is making his own way through his wits and adventuresome nature (and never mind that his GPS is still dead and he hasn't the slightest idea where he is heading).

Up ahead he sees a hand painted sign nailed to a fence post, set back so far from the edge of the road that the brambles have nearly engulfed it. It reads:

GAS

1-mile

Chilton smiles at that, pleased, right up until the fuel station comes into view.

It's little more than a dilapidated shack, surrounded on all sides by the gutted relics of old cars. Rust covers everything.

A man whom Chilton suspects looks much older than his actual years sits in a rocking chair outside the store. Chilton spares him a glance before looking down at his phone again - still no signal - and then getting out of the car with it still in hand, hoping that perhaps walking around with the phone might make some difference.

The pump jockey is so filthy that Chilton can smell him from a yard away. To avoid further intimacy he comes to a halt some distance from the man.

“The highway is unpassable,” Chilton tells him without preamble. He’s watching his phone - or rather, the signal bars, which remain stubbornly flat. “Do you know of a different route, heading south?”

“No.”

“No,” Chilton repeats incredulously, looking up from his phone. He’s used to seeing hostility. He’s seeing a lot of it now.

“No,” the hick repeats, and when he speaks Chilton sees that he possesses only one unbroken tooth and the yellow stubs of a few others.

He has a bottle of generic brand Pepto-Bismol in his hand, and Chilton watches as he brings it to his mouth and takes a swig of it as though he were drinking a particularly poor whiskey.

Furious and disgusted, Chilton turns, but halts in front of the filthy plate glass window when he glances down at his phone again and sees a flicker of movement in the upper right-hand corner, the signal going from nil to one short bar, but then it dies again.

When he looks up again he sees a tattered, yellowing map hanging in the flyspecked window. Studying the map, Chilton sees a dotted line marked as Bear Mountain Road that runs past the fuel station before cutting back to the highway about twenty miles up.

Validated that he was already on the right path all along and never needed guidance from the slurly, toothless station attendant, Chilton snaps a picture of the map and then gets back into his car.

Before he sets out again, he writes out a text message for Alana and Hannibal, informing them of the great time he has been having along this rustic little detour, and advising them to alter their own route in order to take in the charm of the country road and the little fuel station, which is staffed by quite the local character. He includes the picture of the map.

It will send, when the phone achieves a brief flicker of signal, roughly two hours later.

Chilton won’t be dead by then, but he will be beginning to sincerely wish that he was.

A few miles further down the gravel road Chilton spots a dead deer, its rear end lying in the road and its front half on the narrow shoulder. It’s a gruesome thing - something has been chewing on it - and as Chilton tracks it with his eyes as he drives past it he wonders if there are still any actual bears on Bear Mountain Road, and out of habit he picks up his phone to google it only to be reminded that he still doesn’t have a signal.

When Chilton looks up again there is a dirty little child standing in the road in front of him. He slams on the breaks, and his car skids to a halt a few yards shy of hitting the brat.

It’s a boy, dark-haired and stick-thin, dressed in overalls and a t-shirt. His unruly hair looks like it hasn’t been brushed in the last year or so.

The boy circles around the passenger side of the Jaguar, and Chilton sees that he's moving with a limp on his right side. Both his feet are bare.

When the boy raps on the window Chilton is so astonished that he rolls it down for him.

"Yes?" Chilton says.

"I was playing in the woods and I hurt my ankle," the kid tells him. "I twisted it. Can you please give me a ride home, please?"

"I'm on a schedule," Chilton tells him. "I'm heading up Bear Mountain Road and back to the expressway."

"That's great," the boy, though he doesn't sound especially enthusiastic. "That goes right by my folks' place."

"Hurry up then," Chilton says with a sigh, and the kid doesn't need a second invitation. He climbs in the car and shuts the door behind himself.

"Have you got anything to eat?"

Sighing again, Chilton tells the waif, "There's a box of nutrition bars under the seat."

The kid bends and gets the plastic container out. He takes two from the box and shoves them into the pocket of his overalls. Then, watching Chilton out of the corner of his eye to see if he can get away with it, he takes a third.

Chilton takes the box away from him and reaches around to put it in the back, where the boy can't reach it.

"You have extraordinarily poor manners," Chilton informs him. "What is your name?"

The boy fidgets, refusing to meet his eye.

"Go on, answer me. What is your name?"

"Will," the boy says sullenly, as though Chilton has unreasonably demanded of him something that he doesn't want to give.

Annoyed, Chilton reaches out and turns on the radio. The dial lands on Christian programming. An evangelical preacher with a heavy accent sermonizes in a jostling cadence that is almost but not quite shouting.

"When you plant your *seed* in your own *kin* you anger *God* -"

"Yikes," Chilton says, and reaches forward to change the channel, dialing past two other preachers and gospel music before stopping at a local news report.

"Police still have not been able to locate the two college students. Richard Stoker and Halley Smith have been missing since last month, after failing to return from a weekend of rock-

climbing -”

Will reaches out and turns the radio off.

“Excuse you,” Chilton says, turning to glare daggers at the brat.

There’s an uneasy, pained look in Will’s eyes, when he glances up briefly to meet Chilton’s gaze, but he attributes that to the twisted ankle. It never occurs to him that the boy might be feeling sorry for him.

The kid lifts his hand and points at the road ahead, which has forked. “Take a left here,” he tells Chilton.

Chilton stops the Jag in front of the diverging roads. On the left the road continues on as it has, two narrow lanes of gravel. The other path is one one-lane dirt road, badly pitted and caged in by overhanging trees. The sign intended to indicate which way follows Bear Mountain Road lays flat on its back in the brush, barely visible from the road.

Dubiously, Chilton looks down at his phone again, wanting to check this advice against the GPS, but there’s still no signal.

If I’m all in then so are they, he thinks, and composes a new text message for Alana and Hannibal, advising them to take a left at the unmarked fork in the road.

Beside him, Will buckles his seat belt.

“You ought to have done that ten minutes ago,” Chilton tells him.

“Sorry,” Will says, and squirms anxiously in his seat.

There is something in the tone in which the boy delivers this apology that catches Chilton’s attention, the grave sincerity of it that seems far too serious to be warranted for the situation, but it doesn’t hold his focus for long.

He is too focused on patting himself on the back for being a nice enough person to help the ungrateful little hick to actually pay much attention to Will, and they drive on in silence for a few minutes before it occurs to Chilton that the kid might be the perfect blank slate on which to practice his upcoming conference presentation.

When he informs Will of this, the boy blinks at him and says, “Alright,” and so Chilton proceeds without further preamble.

“Psychopaths evoke pity,” Chilton recites, reading out loud from his phone while he navigates the Jaguar around the worst of the pits in the dirt road. “The same kind of pity we feel toward invalids or experience for helpless and sick children.

“However, often this pity creates difficulties, and many is the person who falls prey to it. We often try to be kind to these ‘poor’ people, and they are ‘poor’ people - our pity is justifiable. However the problem is that psychopaths readily manipulate those around them through just such pity.

“When we as professionals fall prey to the belief that psychopaths are human beings like any other - human beings, that is to say, who can be helped and healed - the result will always be severe disappointment. It is important for psychiatrists that, when we recognize a patient to be a psychopath, we avoid spending too much of their time and energy on him, saving it for those cases where our efforts will be effective and helpful.”

Chilton pauses, looking up from his phone to Will, whose expression is guardedly dubious. “Well? What do you think?”

“I don’t really understand it,” the boy tells him.

“Of course you don’t.”

His eyes flick towards the road ahead of them and then back to Chilton. “But it seems... kinda mean-hearted,” Will says slowly.

Chilton is trying to formulate a response to that, laying out in his mind all the solid arguments he brings to bear against patients’ rights advocates and other naive troublemakers and figuring out how to dumb them down to the level of a ten-year-old ignorant hillbilly, when Will speaks again.

“I guess you aren’t a very nice person,” Will tells him, and there’s something hard and merciless in his eyes now. It scares Chilton, makes him think for the first time that he’s misunderstood something fundamental about the situation and about the boy. “I bet nobody’s gonna miss you.”

There’s a loud sound as both the Jaguar’s front tires blow out. The wheel jerks violently in Chilton’s hands, and he struggles with it, trying to keep the car from veering off the road and into one the trees as he slams on the brakes.

When the Jaguar comes to a halt, Chilton fumbles with his seat belt and gets out of the car, noting distantly that Will is doing the same.

The front tires are absolutely shredded, and when Chilton bends over to get a closer look he sees a length of barbed wire tangled around them.

Understanding dawns quickly: someone did this *deliberately* , and the boy had a part in it.

He looks up to accuse Will of just that, and sees him leaning back into the car to reach for the snackbox in the backseat.

Chilton catches him by the arm before he can get it, but Will is agile as a weasel and wiggles out of his grip before turning to run for the woods.

As Will melts into forest two larger, distorted forms are emerging from the shadows, and Chilton backs away from them, gibbering threats and promises at the men advance upon him with predatory intent.

It’s the third man - the one that Chilton doesn’t see - that sidles up behind him and tightens a noose of barbed wire around his throat.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took more work than anything I've produced in the last three years. I'm therefore hoping even harder than usual that yall enjoy it, and so comments are both welcomed and highly valued.

The text of Chilton's conference talk is take from "The Emptied Soul: On the Nature of the Psychopath" by Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig, and I just want to be very clear that I absolutely disagree with his conclusions.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Screams follow Will as he runs through the woods, the shadows of old growth trees hang over him menacingly as the twisted thorny brush grabs at his arms and legs, trying to hold him back.

Will breaks through the thick undergrowth, running on despite the ache in his shoulders and the way his bad leg hobbles him, paying no mind to the red lines the thorny blackberry canes draw across his arms and legs, and the screams and the garbled talking of his uncles have faded away now, though once uncle Wasco's high laughter cuts through the fragile silence.

The woods is opening up now, warm sunlight filtering down through the branches above, and his bare feet find familiar paths through the thinning undergrowth, and as forest gives way to field Will can hear music - Vivaldi's Four Seasons, growing louder as Will grows closer. The car graveyard just ahead, decades worth of waylaid cars and trucks and vans parked forever among the wildflowers and grass.

Will slows as he approaches the graveyard, conscious of the risk of stepping on rusted metal or broken glass, and pulls his backpack off his shoulders and opens it up to take out a pair of worn out sneakers. They are about three sizes too big, and they make his bad leg hurt more than it usually does, but he slips them on and ties the laces up tight to keep them from falling off.

Some of the dead cars Will walks by are older than himself by many years, and some are older than his uncles - maybe even older than his Papaw Maynard, who owns the gas station at the bottom of Bear Mountain Road - but a lot of them are still shiny and new.

A lot of them got here because Will played the bait to lure their riders in, and he goes past them quickly, his head low, working to push back the associated memories that he can attach to each of the abandoned cars he is responsible for, so when he comes finally to the car from which the music is playing, Will can look up at his little brother and greet him with an easy and genuine smile.

D's face lights up when he sees Will, too, and for a minute Will almost feels innocent and sweet, a world away from the snotty city man's death and the ugly mess that he knows he and D will have to return to eventually.

His little brother sits on the hood of a red Dodge Journey. The SUV's engine is running and its doors are open wide to let the music out, and without asking Will knows that D was laying back against the hood and the windshield, enjoying the comforting rumble of the Journey's engine while he basked in the warm sunlight and watched the clouds go by.

Will doesn't scold D for turning the SUV on, though its gas tank was less than halfway full last time Will checked it. He just ducks in behind the wheel for a second to turn the volume

down, and then he scrambles up onto the hood with D and sits cross-legged next to him.

“Look what I found,” Will says, and takes the nutrition bars from his pocket. They’re a little smooshed, but that doesn’t bother either of them.

Will keeps one bar for himself and hands the other two to D. His smile falters as he takes the food from Will, but Will pretends not to notice as D looks down at the two bars in his hand and then up at Will again doubtfully, troubled by the unfairness of it.

In the past, D rarely questioned Will’s efforts to take care of him, but he’s getting older - by Will’s best guess he’s about seven years old now - and lately he’s started to notice all the ways that Will treats him better than he treats himself, and to dig his heels in over it.

Hitting on an idea, D opens one of the bars and breaks it in two, then holds half out to Will.

Will ducks his head, smiles soft and sad, and lies to him. "That's okay - I already had one. Those are both yours."

D accepts that, but with uncertainty.

Anxious and guilty, Will adds, “And we’ll have a lot more of these bars tomorrow morning - a whole big box of them.”

Will is confident that his uncles won’t have raided the doctor’s car for food or anything else. Back when Will was smaller they would take home anything that was useful or interesting - food, medicine, clothing, toys and tools and all kinds of things - and cars that were waylaid in his Papaw’s day were often striped right down to their frames for parts, but things are different these days.

These days, all his uncles seem to care about is killing and meat, and even the latter seems increasingly unimportant to them - a pretext for what they do (what Will helps them do) rather than a reason.

The last time his uncles brought home meat it was a couple of mountain climbers, and they’d either been thrown over a cliff or jumped in trying to get away, and a lot of the meat had been ruined in the fall - ruptured organs and bones splinters all the way through - but a lot of what little was salvageable was mostly left out to go bad.

For a minute, Will wonders what the three of them are doing with the doctor right now, but then he tells himself he isn’t bothered by the fate of the rude man. And anyway, Will tells himself, trying to ignore the wormy squirming in his belly, that man is lucky that things have so lean lately; if the uncles are as hungry as Will expects they are, probably they’ll kill him pretty quickly. Better people have been handed worse cards.

He and D have a good time anyway, despite everything. Will hooks their Nintendo DS up to the car charger, and D is overjoyed to just sit and play Pokemon, curled up comfortably in the SUV’s front passenger seat while Will fiddles with the radio beside him.

It's spring, and they are alive and happy and not too hungry, relaxing together away from the homeplace and the uncles and all of the associated stresses, and if Will can't quite shake his guilt that is riding him by now he knows that it is something he can live with if it means his little brother is taken care of.

Will watches D out of the corner of his eye, in a way that D won't notice. He is staring down intently at the DS screen, the tip of his tongue sticking out between the gap in his front teeth in concentration. D is a lot younger than Will but not all that much smaller.

Will can't imagine himself as a grown up, but when he looks at D with his lanky limbs and long neck he can picture him big and strong and...

Good?

Will doesn't know. He figures he doesn't have much of an idea of what *good* even means. It's something he's only read about in books, as alien and as mystifying as the idea of art galleries and shopping malls.

Different then.

Yeah. I want him to be different.

Different from his uncles and Papaw. Different from Will himself, too.

Will thinks again about the doctor, so tidy and well put together - so confident in his own superiority, but no closer to good than anyone other than D that Will calls kin. That's not the kind of different that Will is hoping against hope to somehow give to D.

It's too big a problem to bring to heel, and because he doesn't know how to give D any of the intangible things he wants his little brother to have Will decides on giving him the best thing he's got to offer.

He gets out of the Journey and goes around to one of the other recently waylaid vehicles, and pops the unlocked trunk. There's a suitcase inside it, and Will glancing up to make sure D isn't watching what he's going, Will roots around until he finds what he's looking for.

Closing the trunk, Will holds the object behind his back as he walks toward D, who is still lost in the game. He taps on the side of the SUV to get D's attention, and when he looks up Will holds the t-shirt out to him and says, "Look - a present!"

D takes the shirt from Will eagerly, holding it up so he can look at it. It's sky blue and soft as a cloud, and across its front is printed a collage of stunning white tigers.

It is the most beautiful thing that D has ever seen, and he would like to jump up and down and squeal with excitement, but instead he is transfixed, staring into the icy blue eyes of the tigers.

He looks up, meaning to thank Will - meaning to dance around with the tiger shirt and to tear his smelly old shirt off and put the new one on instead and then thank Will a dozen times more - but D catches something in Will's eyes before he can shunt whatever it is away to where D can't see it.

That sense of doubt, so new and so troubling, sneaks up on D again.

He asks Will, "Where'd you get it at?"

"Papaw went to the Walmart in Rolesville and brought it back for you," Will tells him.

"What did he get for you?"

"Don't you worry about that."

"I don't think he got me anything," D says slowly. "He doesn't like me."

"Of course he does. When you were a little baby, he showed me and Wasco how to give you your bottle, just like he did with Jed when he was little." Uncle Jed has a cleft lip too, though his looks a lot different from D's. "He went into town to get formula and bottles then, too."

"He doesn't like me," D repeats. "What did I do, to make him not like me?"

"You didn't do nothing," Will tells him, surrendering to D's assessment of the old man. "Not a single thing. He's just a bitter lonesome old thing, and he doesn't like anyone."

D nods, but he is thinking, *But he likes you, Will.*

He thinks maybe that's because Maynard and Will both have plain faces that look the same as the kinds of faces that strangers have, not at like D and their uncles, but he doesn't say this in case it might make Will feel badly about himself.

Instead, he shrugs his shirt off and drops it in the grass, where he promptly forgets about it. He puts the tiger shirt on and then pulls its front out and peers down at it so he can look at the tigers some more.

"It's a little big," Will says, dissatisfied. But then he smiles. "Guess you'll grow into it before long, though."

D hugs himself so he can feel the soft clean cotton with his body and his hands and his arms all at the same time, and then he spins in circles, laughing and ecstatic, until Will is laughing so hard that he can't stand up straight. D bumps into a fender and delightfully dizzy, plops down on the ground to enjoy the way the world spins wildly around him.

"Look," Will says, crouching down right behind D's ear. He points over D's shoulder at the tire of the trunk D is sitting next to, and D sees the tiny green praying mantis making its way across the black rubber.

D watches it, fascinated. "Should we give it something to eat?" he asks Will. He is thinking about the snacks Will brought him, and wishing that he hadn't scarfed them down so quickly.

Already, D is hungry again.

“Nah,” Will says. “It’s alright. He’ll find his own food.”

Will pauses, then he adds, “Wonder where the little guy is going, though.”

“Can we go to the fire tower and watch the stars?”

D asks this because he can tell that something has gotten Will down, and going to the observation tower almost always cheers them both up.

Watching the stars and moon from the tower, cuddled up safe in Will’s lap while he talked gently to him about nothing in particular is D’s earliest clear memory.

Before that, D remembers only being scared almost all of the time, and crying a lot, though he doesn’t know what caused those fears or his tears.

Sitting with Will while they watched the night sky, feeling safe and secure and loved made all of that go away, though, eventually, whatever its source.

“Sure,” Will says, and smiles at him.

But they don’t make it to the fire tower.

Instead, they meet Alana Bloom and Hannibal Lecter on the road.

Chapter End Notes

Note to readers familiar with the Wrong Turn canon: Because they are never given natural names in the films, I’ve taken the liberty of naming the three Hilliker brothers myself.

Saw-Tooth: Jed (In honor of one of the names Leatherface is given in the TCM canon).

One-Eye: Scurvis.

Three-Finger: Wasco.

The last two names are taken from the song "Just a Crush," by the Pine Box Boys.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Quick note - I went with the novel canon to describe D's cleft lip and palate. I also used the examples of D's early speak impairment provided in the novel in writing his (extremely limited here) dialogue.

Hannibal suggests that they stop at the rundown little gas station out of curiosity, and as a kind of recognizance; Alana does not seem to be cognizant of this, but he is aware that there have been an abnormally high number of disappearances in the area, especially in recent years.

Hannibal is always interested in meeting other serial killers.

When he approaches the nearly toothless old man behind the register to pay for the fuel Alana pumped to top off the tank of her Prius, Hannibal can smell the stomach ulcers on his breath. The man looks briefly at Hannibal, who keeps his own face disarmingly neutral, and then dismisses him.

Handing over the money, Hannibal says conversationally, "Did another gentleman come through here earlier today? He would have been driving a Jaguar."

"Not so far as I remember," the man says, and takes longer than he needs to looking down at the till to count out Hannibal's change.

That's as good as a confirmation that Chilton passed through this way.

"Take care," Hannibal tells him, taking the change.

The man's flinty eyes rise to meet Hannibal's.

"You cutting wise to me, son?"

"Not at all," Hannibal says, and turns to go.

His hand is on the doorknob when the man tells him, "You're the one who better take care."

Hannibal turns back to face him, then smiles harmlessly.

"I didn't get your name," he says politely. It goes without saying that the man will not have a business card, but Hannibal knows ways of finding him again, sometime down the road.

"Maynard."

“Maynard...?” Hannibal repeats, fishing for a surname, though he probably doesn’t need it; he is almost positive the man lives in the gas station, and even if he didn’t it would be an easy matter to follow this Maynard home from work some night.

“None of your business, mister.”

Hannibal goes through all the motions of dropping it. He slips through the door and goes back to the car to slide into the passenger seat, and he knows that his agitation is well concealed because Alana does nothing to indicate that she is aware that he feels anything but mild cheerfulness.

Chilton was right about one thing, at least - it is beautiful here. As they continue down the road they are surrounded on all sides by vivid green. Through the open window Hannibal can smell the sharp scent of the Queen Anne’s lace growing along the sides of the road.

In the brush, just past the edges of the road, Hannibal notices a surprising number of discarded objects. Not empty beer bottles and other litter, as there is little of that here - odd things that might have been valuable, or at least valued by their owner, at point. Books and items of clothing. He even sees a suitcase, open and overturned in the mud, underclothing spilling out of it like the guts of some murdered creature.

Oddly, he hears very little bird song.

They are beginning to lose the light when Hannibal spots the two boys walking down the side of the road.

One of them is barefooted and rail thin. There’s something wrong with either his spine or his left leg or both, and it gives him an odd gait. The second boy is smaller and seems to be in better condition.

Hannibal makes a small cautioning sound, and Alana says, “I see them,” and out of an abundance of care slows the car down to a crawl.

The pair don’t hear the Prius approaching until it is almost upon them, but when they do the larger of the two snaps into action and pushes the smaller behind himself, shielding him from view, and so when the car coasts past them Hannibal sees only his face, caught in a snarling rictus of fear.

“Pull over, please,” Hannibal tells Alana.

He approaches the children carefully, as though they are half-tame animals that might bolt at the slightest scent of ill intentions, and comes to a stop just slightly outside of normal speaking distance.

The older boy’s teeth are bared, though Hannibal is not certain that he realizes it, and his frightened eyes dart from Hannibal and then away again in quick spasms, as though he is seeking some avenue of escape.

The smaller boy is still hidden behind the other, his arms tangled around the bigger boy's waist. He says something, and though Hannibal cannot understand him it has the intonation of an uncertain question, probably addressed to the bigger boy.

Severe speech impairment, Hannibal thinks, and curious he steps to the left, trying to get a better look at the child.

The bigger one turns with Hannibal, shifting his bare feet to keep the other child safely behind him, and glancing downward he sees the way the boy's left knee and foot turns inward, and how he stands on the toes of that foot though the right foot rests firmly on the ground.

Malunion resulting from a fractured femur, Hannibal notes. *Damage to the growth plates resulting in a disparity in the length of his legs*. He wonders what happened to the boy, and why he has not received more effective treatment.

The smaller boy is wearing shoes, but upon second glance Hannibal notes that oddly they are an expensive brand of women's running shoes, rather than anything he would expect to see on a boy child so obviously entrenched in poverty.

When Hannibal glances up again he catches the smaller boy peeking at him from behind his protector, one bright eye peering at him from below a tangle of dark hair. Caught out, he ducks behind the bigger boy again an instant later, but Hannibal can tell that curiosity has gotten the better of the child now, too, and it is only a matter of time before he sneaks another look at Hannibal.

The smaller boy is clearly the more approachable of the pair, and so Hannibal crouches down to his level and addresses him. "Hello there."

A pause, and then the child says tentatively, "...Lhho."

When Hannibal smiles for him and echos, "Hello," the boy discovers a reserve of bravery, and steps away from what Hannibal assumes to be his older brother.

Hannibal is careful about his own face. His smile doesn't flicker or fade.

Bilateral fissures in the upper lip, Hannibal thinks, *and doubtless in the soft and hard palates as well, judging from how the unanchored center section of his mouth protrudes*. The boy's nose is flat.

Hannibal wonders if the shy smile the child offers him before he ducks behind the bigger boy again hurts his face

It is astonishing, even in this backwoods local, to find a child that has not had such a severe cleft lip and palate surgically repaired before his first birthday. It's an even greater mystery than the older boy's poorly healed broken leg.

When he looks up at the older boy again, Hannibal sees stunned, bald astonishment on his face. There's a nearly faded bruise across his cheek, and that invokes its own set of

questions.

While he is still on the back foot, Hannibal straightens. He steps closer and offers his hand to the older boy.

“My name is Hannibal,” he tells them.

The bigger boy is still for a long beat, stunned again, and then tentatively takes it.

“Will.”

Hannibal does not squeeze as they shake hands, but the boy’s grip is stronger than he expected. His palms are rough and his nails bitten down to the quick. The uncorrected syndactyly that fuses his middle and ring finger is, when compared to everything else, hardly remarkable.

Will takes his hand back as quickly as he can. “That’s D,” he tells Hannibal, when Hannibal crouches down to the smaller boy’s level again.

He holds his hand out for the child, but that is more boldness than he can manage, and instead he ducks behind Will again. Unoffended, Hannibal stands up.

“D?” he asks Will.

“Andy,” Will allows. “But just D is easier.”

Easier for the boy to say his own name, Hannibal understands that to mean.

“He’s my little brother,” Will adds.

“It’s getting dark out,” Hannibal observes, looking up at the twilight sky to illustrate his point. “Why don’t you let me and my friend Alana give you two a ride home?”

Hannibal is surprised, as aggressively skittish as Will seemed at the beginning, just how easy it is to convince them to get into the car.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Drawing on a tiny aspect of Hannibal's novel-canon that I rarely see discussed in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Do you have any snacks?” Will asks, almost as soon as they are inside the bizarrely quiet little car.

Alana is behind the wheel, which she is gripping hard as she stares out the windshield, but Hannibal is turned to the side in his seat so he can watch Will.

“Of course,” he answers, and he seems oddly pleased by the question. “Look in the container under your seat.”

Will was already eyeing the frosted glass box with the plastic lid as a potential source of food. Now, he sits it in his lap and pries the lid off. Inside, he finds more than a dozen little dry cured sausages.

“Hunter’s sausage,” Will says, and holds the container up at an angle so D can see the contents too.

“That’s right,” Hannibal says. “My own recipe.”

Will looks up at Hannibal. “How many can we have?”

“As many as either of you would like,” he tells them, turning his head to look towards D part of the way through saying this, so he knows that he is included, too.

But for reasons Will can’t name he hesitates, and as though to assuage his uncertainty Hannibal says, “It’s alright if you finish them.”

Will moves fast then. He gathers the entirety of the box’s contents up in his fist, and passes a little more than half over to D, who takes them eagerly, leaving Will holding half a dozen of the small sausages.

Guilt strikes Will suddenly, as he looks down into the empty container, and he puts two of the sausages back in the box, then closes it and holds it out to Hannibal.

“That’s very considerate of you,” Hannibal tells him, taking the box and putting it on the floor under his feet.

“Doesn’t matter,” Will mutters, and that’s the truth. It’s stupid, really - Hannibal will be dead before very long, and Alana with him, so it doesn’t make any difference if Will leaves something for him to eat.

I can get the rest after the uncles take this car up to the graveyard, Will thinks defeatedly.

For now, he puts the hunter’s sausage in his pocket - anxiety is filling up his belly, and he isn’t at all hungry anymore.

D, however, is busy scarfing his down.

“That’s good,” he tells the car at large.

Will catches Alana’s eyes in the rearview mirror, and he sees the troubled concern there in response to how D talks, and Will takes it badly. He marks it with no intention of forgiveness.

He knows that aside from himself and Maynard no one in his family is intelligible to outsiders.

Will usually sounds like the person he’s talking with. Now, as he and Hannibal chat about this or that, without meaning to - without even being fully conscious of doing so - Will begins to pick up the flow of Hannibal’s accent and to mirror it back at him.

“You have an impressive gift for mimicry,” Hannibal tells him.

Will’s heart thuds sickly. It is the first time in years - perhaps the first time in his life - that anyone other than D has complimented him, and when it is coming from a grownup Will has no idea what to do with it.

For lack of knowing what else to do, he takes it like a scolding. “I’m sorry,” he says quickly, and turns his eyes away from Hannibal’s curious face. “I didn’t mean to copy you.”

Hannibal debates chucking the boy under the chin to get him to look up at him again, but rejects the idea. It would be too much too soon, and Will seems likely to respond like a kicked dog to the gesture - to cringe or whimper or lash out with teeth.

Even putting to the side the severe medical neglect, the hallmarks of abuse are clearly stamped on both the boys, but especially the older one.

Alana has noted it too, of course, and reached her own conclusions about the situation. When Hannibal returned to the car with the boys she passed him her cellphone. No signal out here, but she’d written in the message box, *I’m worried about approaching the parents. They might be dangerous, and we don’t have any support out here.* Hannibal nodded to show he took the concern seriously, and gave her back her phone.

Now, Hannibal says to Will, “You should be pleased with yourself. It’s quite the talent.”

The boy's eyes flutter up at him, checking to see if Hannibal is teasing him, and then dart away again. "Yeah?" Will says, doubtfully.

"What other voices can you do?"

Will thinks for a moment, and then in near perfect BBC English he rattles off a couple of the day's headlines, which Hannibal and Alana heard on the radio themselves only a few hours earlier. There may be no cellphone service, Hannibal notes, but it seems NPR has reached even these rural expanses.

In response to Hannibal's pleased nod, Will switches to what Hannibal imagines to be a local gospel preacher, condemning pride and worldliness in a thick West Virginian accent, the boy's voice suddenly powerful inside the enclosed space with the impassioned rectitude of whatever Bible thumper he's mimicking.

"Fantastic," Hannibal says, when the spiel comes to an end. "Another?"

Emboldened now as only a child utterly unfamiliar with praise and starving for another taste of it, Will says with an all-too-familiar pomposity, "Psychopaths evoke pity - the same kind of pity we feel toward invalids or experience for helpless and sick children..."

Despite Hannibal's efforts to keep his face neutral, Will has caught something there, and he grids to an uncertain halt, watching Hannibal worriedly.

"He sounds like Fredrick," Alana says, and sighs, and now it is Hannibal's turn to catch something flashing across Will's face that the boy did not want him to see - guilt, perhaps.

It is all becoming more and more interesting.

Will has retreated to the banal safety of quoting cartoon characters, and is now reciting pokemon facts. That interests his little brother, who interjects with comments that are not at first intelligible to Hannibal. But he listens carefully, getting a sense of the unfamiliar typography of D's accent and his speech impediment, which is severe, and before very long he is able to understand most of what the boy is saying, though the topic under discussion is for Hannibal an undiscovered country.

Though D seems quite shy, he is not embarrassed by his own voice, not in the way that Hannibal might have expected even of a well-socialized child with a much less severe impairment. It is as though no one has ever taught him that he ought to be ashamed to be different, and that is as endearing to Hannibal as it is curious.

They pass a mangled roadkill deer on the side of the road, and D says something that Hannibal is almost certain translates out to, "Look, Will - there's some more food!"

Will flushes red and shushes him, then twists around to watch the carcass fade into the distance. In the oversized overalls it is very easy to see that the boy is developing kyphosis. There's a little hump forming at the midpoint between his cervical and thoracic vertebrae, and even when he turns back around to face forward in the seat his shoulders aren't entirely even.

From behind the wheel, Alana says, “Do you think that your parents are going to be home?”

Will lowers his head sulkily. Alana is handling the oddness of the situation about as well as Hannibal might have expected, but there was an ice moment of absolute shock when she first saw D’s face, and that was not lost on Will. He’s still seething about it, Hannibal is quite sure, though he is working to hide that anger from D lest the smaller boy wonder about its source.

“Will?” she says, when he doesn’t answer her.

“Don’t have any parents,” he mutters, and the thickness of his accent now is a clear gesture of defiance. “Our uncles look out for us.”

“Do your uncles -” Alana begins, but they have come to a fork in the road, and Will raises his voice to talk over her at the same time he raises his arm to point. Will’s hand hovers only a few inches from Hannibal, and he gets another look at the boy’s case of syndactyly.

“If you’re talking us home, you’re going to want to take the dirt road on the right,” he says. Then, after a pause, Will adds in an odd voice, “If that’s what you want to do.”

Alana taps the side of Hannibal’s leg, and he turns back around to meet her eyes, feigning the same concern that he sees in her own face as she points the car down the dirt road. Then he returns his attention to Will.

“May I see your hand?” Hannibal asks him.

Will hesitates, for just a moment, but then he lifts his left hand to offer it to Hannibal, who opens his mouth, looking for some tactful way to correct the boy’s mistake.

Then Will laughs - a giggly, stunningly normal child’s laugh - and holds up his right hand so Hannibal can get a clearer view of the way his ring and middle finger are fused together.

“One of my uncle’s hands is the same way, but more,” Will says, almost as though in boast. “It’s like he has two big fingers and a thumb.”

Hannibal is familiar with that form of syndactyly, but has never seen it himself outside of in a medical specimen jar. “That sounds fascinatingly unique,” he says honestly.

Hannibal holds his own hand up for Will, palm facing inward. He spreads his fingers, then with his other hand points to the gap between his index and middle finger. “Do you see?”

Will leans in closer and stares. “There’s a little scar,” he says, a bit doubtfully.

“I was born with an extra finger there,” he tells Will. “But my parents had it surgically removed shortly after I was born.”

“Why’d they do that?”

Hannibal shrugs. “I suppose they didn’t want it to become a distraction,” he says, picking the words carefully though he says them casually. “I’ve often wished they hadn’t - or at least that they waited until I was old enough to be consulted on the matter.”

“Opposites in common,” Will says, clearly delighted. “How about that?”

“You never told me about that,” Alana says, quietly, to Hannibal.

More loudly she says, “How much further to your house, Will?”

Sudden worry clouds Will’s face. “Couple-few miles, I guess,” he says, then leans back in the seat to look out the window.

He’s quiet for the rest of the ride, twitchy and anxious, staring out the side window to avoid Hannibal, and that tells Hannibal that he should be prepared for some sort of encounter when they reach the boys’ home.

But when they reach the ramshackle, half-fallen-down shotgun shack, with its surrounding dilapidated outbuildings and the half a dozen rusted out cars and trucks out in front, Will brightens suddenly.

“They aren’t home yet,” he says excitedly.

Then, reaching over D to unbuckle his seatbelt and pushing the car door open he says, talking fast and tugging at D’s arm to get him to move faster, “Thanks for the ride! Highway is about ten miles up the road.”

He slams the door and starts to pull a confused-looking D up the long driveway towards the house, pausing only to turn back to Hannibal and say, “Take care now!” before hurrying on.

Hannibal stares at them through the window.

From behind the driver’s seat, Alana says, "We’ll call CPS as soon as we have a cell signal."

“You’re right,” Hannibal says. “Something does need to be done.”

He steps out of the car and strides after the boys.

Chapter End Notes

There's some conflicting canon about whether Three-Finger was born that way or lost a couple of fingers when he was a kid, but I like the idea of him having syndactyly so that's what I rolled with.

Moving towards some Dramatic Plot Events soooooon...

Chapter 5

Hannibal catches up with the boys just as Will, having already shepherded D inside, slips into the dilapidated house.

Catching the door before Will can close it in his face, Hannibal peers inside. Chaotic filth greets him. The stench is astonishing.

He looks down at Will and says, "May I come in?"

There's fury in the boy's face as well as fear. He blinks back frustrated tears and says, "You're gonna get me in trouble."

"My word, Will - I take full responsibility for any consequences of my being here."

Will shrugs one of his slightly uneven shoulders and turns away. "Fine," he says, bitterly. "Suit yourself."

Behind him, Hannibal hears the sound of shoes on the gravel drive - Alana, deciding to join them after all. Hannibal steps into the dim confines of the house and then turns to the side, stretching out his arm to hold the door open for her.

The smell arrests her when she is still feet away from the door. Difficult to blame her; Hannibal has set his own distaste to the side as he works on teasing out individual scents from the reeking medley, and some of what he's finding is of great interest to him.

She comes closer, but only so she can speak to him in a voice that is both urgent and pitched to stay between the two of them, "What are you doing?"

And Hannibal, who is himself not entirely sure himself, says, "Aren't you curious?"

She is, of course, underneath the unease and her building frustration with him, but she digs her heels in. "We shouldn't be here, Hannibal," she says. And then, something between a plea and command, "It's not safe. We need to go - *now*."

"I imagine I'll be out shortly," Hannibal tells her. "Feel free to wait outside."

He lets the door slide shut, taking caution that it doesn't slam.

There may be consequences for such discourteous behavior later, Hannibal is fully aware, but he cannot seem to give much consideration to the potential damage he may be doing to their friendship or his reputation among their circle of associates.

Stepping further inside the dim abode, Hannibal looks around.

The large front room encompasses the kitchen, dining area, sitting room and apparently at least one bedroom, given the stained wirecoil bed off to the side of the room. Will moves around the room, face grim with shame, righting the overturned kitchen chairs and stacking

plates bearing moldering bones in the already overflowing sink. Shame and anger and fear roll off him in waves that are as powerful as the stink that surrounds them all.

There is a lot of dirty laundry strewn about, but none of it appears to be the right size to fit either of the boys. Nor are there any toys or games in sight - no signs that children live here at all.

D stands in the center of the room, clutching his own wrist with one hand and fidgeting. He looks out of place and uncomfortable, like a guest that is acutely aware of being unwelcomed.

“You two don’t spend a lot of time here?”

It’s an open question, and D is the one to seize upon it, speaking excitedly and at some length. Hannibal can’t parse most of what he is saying, but there’s something in there about cars, and playing, and music, and the ubiquitous Pokemon. At one point he points to the north, and Hannibal turns his head to look out the flyspecked window and up the hill in the direction D is pointing, making careful note.

When D is finished talking both he and Hannibal look to Will for further comment.

Will just says, “We hang out and play outside a lot.”

He reaches across the table for more dirty dishes, lifting two plates that are stacked on top of one another. The motion causes them to shift, and when they do the maggots lurking in the space between the plates are uncovered. They startle Will, and he drops the plates to the floor, where they shatter.

An odd sound that has the inflection of a curse comes out of Will’s throat as he looks down at the mess. He says bitterly, “We haven’t slept here since the winter broke. I don’t - it’s gotten so bad here, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“How old are you, Will?”

“Twelve.”

Hannibal wonders if that’s a lie. The child looks far too small to be twelve, but chronic hunger and poor health often stunts growth.

“You don’t sound completely sure of that.”

“I’m twelve,” Will says, looking up and pushing the hair out of his eyes to stare at Hannibal defiantly. “I’m just about twelve.”

It seems a mercy to distract Will’s attention from the mess in the kitchen, and Hannibal wanders over to the living room area. He pauses before a row of shelves, studying their esoteric and cobwebbed burdens.

The shelves are laden with objects that had not necessarily begun their existence as weapons, but that have an aura of having been turned to that purpose. There are old tools and broken

engine parts, rusty bear traps and wooden fishing lures so old that the paint is cracked and peeling, and among them oddities that Hannibal can't even name, and all of it is coated with a thick layer of grime and dust.

Beside a quart jar jammed with yellowing sets of dentures Hannibal finds a photo album.

He takes it down from the shelf and carries it with him as he walks to the broken down couch that stands near the center of the room. Hannibal sits gingerly on the very edge of it and hears the springs groan in response.

It's an old fashioned sort of photo album, and the Polaroid photos are held in place by bits of yellowing adhesive tape. Hannibal opens to the album's first page, and looks down at a family photo. Easy to accept - if not forget - the abnormalities visibly present in nearly every member of the family when they are all together like that, looking back at the camera with good humor.

There are four people in the picture, three men and one woman. Of the men, two are large and dark haired and one smaller and blond and bent-spine. The smaller man's hands are visible in the picture, and Hannibal notes both the syndactyly, pegging him as the uncle Will mentioned, and the fact that he made no effort to hide it from the camera. One of the larger men has a moderate cleft lip, and the other a disfiguring scar on the upper half of the left-side of his face from some old injury that appears to have cost him the eye.

The woman is auburn-haired and crooked-spined, one shoulder pushed forward and riding up under her chin. The stump of her left arm, which ends just above the elbow, is visible below the short sleeves of her rose-print cotton dress. She is visibly pregnant, her hand spread like a starfish across the rise of her belly.

Hannibal turns the pages, breezing past photos of farm dogs and flowers to study candid pictures of the three uncles.

Then Will is there, unmistakable even as an infant by those messy brown curls, a stunningly healthy-looking baby cradled in the arm of a mother who has grown frail and worn. There are a few more pictures of Will with his mother, who has grown skeletal before the boy is even old enough to walk on his own, but then she disappears from the album.

The pictures that follow after the woman is gone are poorly composed, and placed erratically within the book, as though by someone less interested in the project. The last half a dozen pictures are simply jammed between the pages.

Hannibal can see the uncles slipping, as the album progresses through time. They stop around the time when Will is, perhaps, four years old.

There are no pictures that include D.

When Hannibal looks up again, he sees that both the boys have joined him.

He turns back to the picture at the beginning of the book.

“That’s my Mama,” he tells Hannibal, pointing down at the pregnant woman.

“It looks like she loved you a great deal.”

“I don’t remember anything about her.”

“Which is your father?”

Will is embarrassed by the question, evasive.

“Dunno,” he mutters, and then, becoming aware that he’s been caught in a lie, he says quickly, “I told you already that we don’t have parents anymore.”

The screen door squeals when Alana comes inside.

She is trying very hard to present an air of cold detachment, when she meets Hannibal’s eyes, but her frustration and fear are nearly as palpable as her curiosity. She looks around, working to school her face to conceal the fascinated, horrified disgust the place inspires.

“I need something to drink,” she says to room at large, then turns her back on the three of them to go to the fridge. D is already moving towards her, eager to help, when she opens the fridge door and ducts to look inside.

Even over the general stench of the house, the smell that comes out of the refrigerator when she opens it shocks Hannibal

From behind the door Alana makes choking noise. She straightens, coming back into Hannibal’s line of sight, and she is not so much pale as she is green-faced.

“The bathroom is back there,” Hannibal says, helpfully, and points to a door standing open on the other side of the room.

“Oh god,” Alana says, and bolts in that direction.

D watches her rush past him, puzzled, and winces when the bathroom door slams shut.

Will stands and walks hurriedly towards the fridge, meaning to muffle the smell by closing the door or to keep Hannibal from seeing inside or both, but Hannibal is faster than he is, and always curious about the contents of other people’s refrigerators, and steeling himself to master any possibly negative reactions he strides to it and looks inside.

As he expected, there is uncovered meat that has gone brown and green with age sitting on the shelves, but Hannibal thinks perhaps it is the gallon jug of badly pickled frogs that tipped Alana’s stomach over the edge. Tumors dot the green skins of many of the frogs, and several have sprouted extra legs.

"Sometimes you just got to eat what you can catch," Will says.

“Not much game in the woods?” Hannibal suggests.

Looking around his side to see what Hannibal is seeing, Will says dully, “My Papaw says that there used to be. The mines poisoned the water, though, and the paper mill. Most of the baby animals started to be born dead, and the ones that weren’t were too deformed to live long enough to make babies of their own.”

Will jerks his head towards the bathroom. “You gonna go help her or what?”

“In a moment.”

“You two really should get out of here before it’s too late,” Will tells him.

That’s when they hear the truck engine.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Show him how to get out the backway,” Will tells D in a hissing rush of a whisper. “Take him up to see the cars. I’ll catch up with you just as soon as I can.”

D is scared, clearly, and more than a little confused, but Hannibal notes the way he doesn’t hesitate to follow Will’s instructions.

Hannibal raises no objections to the plan, but instead of following D immediately he looks - pointedly - back at the closed bathroom door.

“I’ll get her,” Will tells him, shoving at the small of Hannibal’s back to get him moving. Frantic now, he says, “*Just go* .”

Outside the front door, heavy footsteps make the rickety old porch groan, and moving quickly now Hannibal follows D into the back room. Will closes the door behind them an instant before the front door bangs open.

A glance is enough to tell Hannibal that he is in the boys’ bedroom, though there’s little enough of them in it. The room isn’t nearly as filthy as the rest of the house, though it is by no means neat. It has the air of an abandoned place, old magazines and broken toys and worn-out clothing piled out of the way against the walls.

Listening intently to the sounds coming from the other side of the door, Hannibal watches as D kneels on the floor in the corner and begins to pry up a loose floorboard. The board, along with several next to it, have been cut about two feet long to allow them to be lifted up, doubtless in order to facilitate a quick exit from the house.

From the other side of the door, Hannibal hears a heavy thud and then a man groaning out in pain. A second voice speaks up over the cries, and that voice is unmistakably human and yet the grunts and squeals that it makes sound more like those of a pig or some other animal.

Will answers that second voice, but not in English - or at least, not anything Hannibal recognizes as English. There is a short exchange between the two of them, and then the first voice speaks up again.

The earlier groans have been replaced by furious shouting, and Hannibal’s own experience tells him that the hoarse and garbled nature of the clamoring is the result of trying to speak around a gag after having spent a considerable amount of time screaming into it.

Despite the extremity that the shouting man has been brought to there remains an offended note to the incomprehensible words, and when the outraged shouting becomes screams and babbling pleas Hannibal places the wrecked voice as that of Frederick Chilton, and with that the answers to at two of the questions he’s been harboring come clear -

Firstly, Will was in fact quoting Chilton when he spoke on the nature of psychopaths earlier, and it follows therefore that Will spent some time speaking with him - or rather, being spoken at - and is likely at least in part responsible for the pickle Frederick has found himself in.

Secondly, if he finds himself on the backfoot with these “uncles” of Will’s there is a possibility that things will not go well for him. This knowledge does not frighten Hannibal, but it sharpens his senses in a manner that is uniquely invigorating.

He is not particularly worried that Will might serve him the same way that he has apparently served Chilton. If the boy wanted Hannibal captured and killed all Will would have had to do was allow his relatives to discover Hannibal in their living room.

Instead, Will has charged his little brother with Hannibal’s escape, or at any rate at least the first leg of it. That suggests a stunning degree of impulsive trust on Will’s part, leaving him alone with the beloved little boy; either Will has concluded that he will not attempt to take D hostage or otherwise harm him, or he is too naive to consider the possibility that Hannibal might attempt to use his brother’s life as leverage to maintain his own.

Hannibal does not believe that Will is naive, at least not in matters of life and death.

D is having problems moving the chunks of floorboard. He’s built strong for the age that Hannibal suspects he is, especially when compared to Will, but they are quite heavy for him, and Hannibal bends to help him lift the remaining boards and set them to the side.

It’s a bit of a drop down into the crawlspace, and Hannibal slides down first and then reaches up to help D. The space is dark and full of cobwebs.

Moving on hands and knees, Hannibal leads the way towards the back of the house, where he can see light shining in from a tunnel that’s been dug under the house’s base. It’s a tight fit for Hannibal, but he makes it through.

He turns back to D, and motioning for him to stay put says softly, “Wait here. I’ll be back shortly.”

Hannibal is cognizant that Will’s other uncles may be nearby, but so much junk has been piled against the side of the house that it is easy for him to stay undercover as he circles around to a side window and peers through it.

Chapter End Notes

This one doesn't progress the story as far as I'd originally planned/promised the next update would, but the chapter was getting so huge that it was unwieldy, so I ended up breaking it up.

Chapter 7

As soon as Alana steps into the bathroom she wishes she hadn't - it smells even worse in here than it did in the kitchen - but her stomach is rebelling and there are no better options within reach, so she leans over the filthy toilet and vomits.

The hot water doesn't work, and there is no soap, and the towel crumpled off to the side of the sink might have started life off white but by now it is impossible to say for sure.

She looks back at herself in the flyspecked mirror, steeling herself to deal not only with the situation itself but also Hannibal; his behavior since they happened upon the boys has been rude as well as shocking reckless, and she is embarrassed and angry and utterly mystified as to why he is making the choices he has been making when something is clearly so seriously wrong here.

With every moment that passes she is becoming more certain that they are in very real danger, and more confounded by Hannibal's unwillingness to even acknowledge her polite efforts to express those concerns, and above all more frustrated that she will apparently have to resort to opening herself up to accusations of being hysterical or a nag in order to be heard.

Shaking the cold water from her hands and wishing for mouthwash she thinks, *I'll leave without Hannibal - I'll tell him that I will leave without him if he doesn't agree to go now.*

It's her car. She has the keys in her pocket.

A new thought, one that has been made suspicious by Hannibal's lack of suspicions about the situation they are in, pipes up to say, *He'll take the keys away from you. He's bigger than you are - he can if he wants to.*

The thought disturbs her. It puts Alana back into motion, and she has opened the bathroom door and is on the verge of stepping over the threshold when she sees a big man, his back to her, dragging something inside through the front door.

The man drops his burden and she sees that it is Chilton. For a moment she thinks that he is covered in dark mud - that is, at least, what her mind *wants* to see - but then reality snaps into focus and she realizes that while it's true that Frederick seems to have literally been dragged through the mud that nonetheless he is covered in blood. Barbed wire is wrapped around his head like a gag, and blood drips from his lacerated mouth.

She gasps and steps back into the bathroom, hand covering her own mouth, and then she starts to look around for a weapon.

As cluttered as the dank space is, not many options leap out at Alana. Then the showerpole catches her eye, and she pushes the mildewed curtain back to see how it is mounted to the wall.

Inside the bathtub, just below the drain, there lies a pallid human ear.

Alana chokes back the disgusted cry that wants to escape from her throat. Reeling, heart thudding in her chest, she finds herself peering through the cracked open door again, just as Will steps into her line of sight.

Frederick sees the boy in the same instant Alana does, and tries to lunge at him, but his legs are tied with more wire and he stumbles and falls with a heavy thud. He cries out, hands clawing at the splintery wooden floor, but then he lifts his head and looks up at Will. He tries to growl something at the boy, but he can't speak around the barbed wire.

Will has gone pale, but the big man laughs - bizarrely childlike - and picks Frederick up by the back of the neck like he's nothing more than a rag doll.

Two new facts reveal themselves when the man turns around; like the smaller boy, his face is marred by a cleft-lip, and he is now holding an axe in his free hand.

Alana lets the door creak shut a bit further, frightened of being spotted, but the man does not so much as glance her way.

He puts the axe down long enough to bend Frederick face-first over the table, and the sound he makes when the barbed wire is ground deeper in his face is inhuman.

Will says something to the big man, except it isn't really speaking - it's hooting and grunts and violent hand gestures, and when the man turns to look at the boy Frederick tries to scramble away.

The man pushes Frederick down against the table again, then he says something to Will.

Will shies away, seeming to object, but the big man waves his arm like Will is one of the legions of flies that swarm the house, shooing whatever he said away, and he grabs the boy by the front of his overalls and jerks him closer.

"Not in the house," Will pleads. "The mess -"

He is thinking about how impossible it will be to hide the worst of it from D, if his uncle kills the stranger in here. At least when they do it in the outbuildings it's easy to hose down the floors afterwards.

But Jed reels Will in and tells him to hold the stranger down.

"Why isn't he already dead?" Will asks again, feeling a sick tangle of desperation and despair roiling around in his guts.

"He went and got Soncy mad," Jed says, indifferent. "He'll be dead in a minute - I said to hold him for me."

"I'm not big enough."

“Then get D to help you.”

All the resistance goes out of Will.

He says, “You hold him down and give me the axe,” and Jed is amenable to that. He’s an agreeable man, a lot of the time. He almost never hits.

The stranger screams, outrage and terror all in one, when Will takes up the axe in his shaky hands, but when Jed slams his face against the table’s surface he quiets down, if only for a few seconds.

His name is Frederick, Will thinks, remembering what Alana said when Will quoted the man’s speech back at them.

Feeling as though he is halfway outside of his own body, Will holds the axe against his own chest as he circles around Jed to get a better angle on Frederick, who is still trying to fight his way free.

With inexorable strength, Jed holds him down, one big hand between his shoulder blades and the other spread over the side of Frederick’s skull, just above the coil of barbed wire.

Frederick’s face looks bad. It looks as bad as anything Will has ever seen on a living person, and this is not the first time he has seen someone suffering from the hurts his uncles laid on them.

Yet he is lucid. His eye tracks Will as he moves, seeing him in a way that he had not seen Will when Will was in his car with him, and while Frederick is seeing Will his arms are still working, striking at Jed’s body or searching the space around him for some object that might somehow help him.

Will reaches out and tugs Frederick’s wrinkled suit jacket down to bare the pale skin of the back of his neck. That line of white flesh seems to be the only part of him that is clean of dirt and blood.

Frederick is moaning now, Without really understanding himself, Will puts a hand over his shoulder, squeezing it gently.

The questing hands go still.

Will steps back and hefts the axe.

He tries his best to make it clean and quick, but Will has never killed anyone before. His hands are unsteady. What Will supposes must be unshed tears blur his vision.

The blood gets everywhere.

Chapter 8

Dazed, Will sits on the floor with his spine against the front of the couch and his legs drawn up against his chest, and watches as Jed hacks at the body that is slumped over the table.

He takes the arm off at the shoulder, stripping the suit jacket sleeve off and allowing it to fall unregarded among the pooled blood and the rest of the filth on the floor, and then holding it at the elbow Jed braces the arm against the surface of the table and with the knife in his other hand cuts chunks of meat from the upper arm. He pauses to smile at Will, pleased, before carrying the meat to the skillet.

It's nothing that Will hasn't seen before, but it is hitting him differently now. Part of that, he will think when his head is clearer, is because he himself was the one to transform a living person into only so much dead meat, but he is also seeing the scene before him as though he believes Hannibal would see it were he to walk in now.

The idea of fresh eyes on this tableau shows everything in a new and uglier light.

"I hate it here," Will says, but softly enough that Jed can't hear him over the crackling of the oil in the pan.

Will wants nothing more than to get away - to go wash the blood off himself and find D so they can sneak away somewhere safe from all of this - but he told Hannibal that he would bring Alana out too, and he can't safely do that until Jed has left or gone to sleep.

And he's not the only obstacle; through the dangling screen door Will can see Wasco and Soncy conferring over the Prius.

When Jed comes towards him Will wants to shy away, or maybe crawl under the couch and hide, but he only stoops to rustle Will's hair as he steps around him on his way to sit down on the couch.

He's got two plates balanced precariously in one hand, and once he's settled down comfortably on the couch he sits one down on the cushion next to him and reaches out to offer the other to Will.

Jed smiles as he does this, an uncomplicated smile that shows he's happy to share, and Will looks down at the half-raw meat, unseasoned and unadorned and exactly what it is, and looks back at the body. The head, which is only hanging on to the rest of it by a thin strip of flesh, sits on the table at an impossible angle, directly parallel to the neck and just above the left shoulder, as though the man snapped it off trying to look over his own shoulder. The dead eyes seem to watch Will.

He shakes his head at his uncle. "Not hungry," Will mutters, though that isn't exactly the truth. He hasn't had anything to eat today but the nutrition bar he got from the dead man, and is woozy with hunger, but his stomach feels too sick to eat.

Jed frowns, worriedly, and maybe that's the worst thing about it; he knows that Will is upset, and is even troubled by that knowledge, but he does not understand how or why Will came to feel that way.

Will can remember good things about Jed, kindnesses he did for Will, and sometimes even for D too. He can remember thrilling horsey back rides and the way that, after Will broke his leg, Jed carried him back home in his arms and put him into bed.

There are good memories - or, at least, as close to good as Will knows - but most of them are old and faded.

Now, Jed shrugs and tips the share he made for Will onto his own plate.

They sit for a while, Jed plowing through his food while the blood on Will's skin dries and turns sticky, but then Jed seems to remember something.

He points at the door with a greasy finger. "Strangers been wandering around here somewhere," he tells Will. "Be careful."

When the scraping noise comes from the bathroom they both hear it, but for a moment Will considers the possibility of pretending that he didn't - and of trying to convince his uncle that he didn't hear anything either. But Jed has put his plate to the side, and his face is intent as he gets to his feet.

"Raccoon got in through the hole under the sink again," Will says quickly. "I'll get it."

But Jed's heavy hand falls on his shoulder, and he pushes Will back, shoving him out of his way, and then he moves towards the bathroom door. His uncle's footfalls are heavy - he is not the same class of hunter that his two brothers are - and Will is sure Alana can hear him coming through the door.

Will follows at a distance behind, wringing his hands and racking his brain for some way to divert him, and Jed swings up the door and Will peers around him and sees...

Nothing.

At first.

And then he notices that the top is missing from the toilet, and remembers the scraping sound, and -

And then Jed steps into the bathroom, looking around with puzzled suspicion, and the shower curtain rustles and Alana emerges from behind it and hits Jed across the side of the skull with the toilet lid.

It's a stunningly well-placed blow, and as Jed staggers backwards she steps out of the bathtub and moves forward to hit him again, and this time he goes down like a ton of bricks, landing face-first on the floor, and she lifts the heavy piece of porcelain above her head and brings it down on the back of Jed's skull, and this time the toilet lid fractures in her hands.

Alana bends to grab one of the biggest chunks in her fist, and then looks at Will, and he can visibly see her debating using it on him, too; Will is used to being hurt by grown-ups, and knows what that kind of speculation looks like.

And then, as though by magic, Hannibal is there, inserting himself between Will and Alana. He takes her by the wrists, but gently, and speaking in a soft tone induces her to drop the weapon as he guides her through the door.

Hannibal draws Alana around to the opposite side of the house from which he left D in hiding. "I know," he murmurs soothingly, as he leads her out of earshot of the boys, "I saw it all."

Fighting the tremor in her own voice, Alana hisses, "Hannibal, they're *cannibals*."

"I'm upset about it myself," Hannibal tells her. "I hate to see good food ruined like that."

Alana jerks away from him. Her eyes are huge as she stares at him, searching his face for some hint of a misunderstanding or a bad joke. She backs away.

"If they are hunting to fill their larder," Hannibal goes on, "they ought to have either cut poor Fredrick's throat cleanly so his heart would continue to beat long enough to pump out most of the blood, or else hung the body up by the legs overnight to bleed it. They ought to have gutted him directly, as well, to avoid the meat becoming tainted."

Hannibal shakes his head. "Something has gone terribly wrong here, if country folk no longer care to process a carcass correctly."

Alana opens her mouth to say something, but then closes it again with an audible click of her teeth. Her eyes dart to the left and right, and Hannibal is pleased that he convinced her to drop her weapon - if not, he has no doubt that she would be attempting to use the heavy piece of toilet lid against him too now.

He steps towards her, moving easily and without hurrying, and she bolts from him.

Hannibal lets her run.

She is, Hannibal knows, resourceful and intelligent. Maybe she'll make it out of these woods alive, but he very much doubts it. Dozens of travelers have gone missing from this general vicinity over the years, and many were far more experienced outdoorsmen and women than is Alana.

He waits until she disappears into the trees, and then he turns and goes back into the house.

Will is kneeling beside his uncles, shaking him by the arm in an attempt to rouse him. The man is unresponsive - Hannibal is impressed, actually, but the number Alana managed to do on the big man.

“Help me turn him over,” Will says, and though moving him is without a doubt medically inadvisable, Hannibal obliges.

The man’s respiration is thick and unsteady.

“Is he dying?” Will demands. “Is he gonna die?”

“Do you wish that he would die?”

Will bites his lip. He doesn’t answer the question.

“Will?”

Hannibal and Will both turn to look at D, who stands uncertainly in the threshold. There are cobwebs in his dark hair.

The presence of Chilton’s body hardly seems to register to the small boy, Hannibal notes. D only glances at it with brief curiosity as he passes it, but when he sees the blood on Will he gets scared.

He runs for Will, who stands and moves away from Jed quickly before D can join them in the bathroom.

D clings to Will’s legs, already choking on his own tears, and quietly Hannibal stands and steps out of the bathroom as well, closing the door behind himself.

“I’m alright,” Will tells him, though clearly he isn’t. “It’s alright - don’t cry.”

Hannibal has to pay close attention to understand him, but he thinks D says, “I saw that lady running, and...”

He trails off, focusing on the sounds coming from the bathroom as the man starts to stir. “Is that Jed? Did he fall down?”

“It’s alright,” Will lies again.

He looks up at Hannibal, and in Will’s face Hannibal can see a legion of unvoiced questions, but all he says is, “You let her run off?”

Calmly, Hannibal says, “We have a better shot without her. With any luck they’ll follow her trail to its terminus without realizing she had a traveling companion, much less that you’re helping me.”

Hannibal pauses then, waiting for Will to confirm that’s what he intends to do.

Will’s face clouds, troubled and angry, but then he nods.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hannibal and the boys are making their way past the outbuildings and towards the treeline when the sound of the truck returning breaks through the silence.

Crouching behind a jumble of junked machinery piled beside the shed, Hannibal watches as the ugly monster of a tow-truck rounds the corner to emerge from behind the trees, no longer hauling the Prius. As the truck approaches the three of them shift their position to stay out of its occupants' line of sight.

It comes to a stop in front of the house.

Hannibal and the boys are hidden where they are now, but if they were to bolt for the woods it would necessitate crossing open ground that offers no better cover than a few patches of dry brush.

Will says, "You two wait here," and breaks away, sneaking to the other side of the shed, so that when he straightens to run for the house any eyes that track him won't turn to Hannibal and D's hiding place, should they happen to glance back at where the boy came from.

"Clever boy," Hannibal says, watching Will limp as quickly as he can towards the brown truck and the two adults who have emerged from it.

He looks down at D. "But why are *you* hiding?"

The boy squirms, discomforted by the question.

"Sometimes I make them mad," he says.

Manic laughter rings out through the air.

It startles Hannibal, though he doesn't show it, but like so many other things it doesn't seem to register as unusual to D.

Hannibal peers out from their hiding place and sees the smallest of the three brothers raise his arm and wave it widely above his head in greeting to Will.

Will knows that he is not really being made fun of when Wasco breaks out into howling giggles when he sees Will limping towards himself and his brother, or at least no more than usual - Wasco just laughs at everything all the time - but biting back on his wounded anger is almost as difficult as keeping the pain his bad leg is giving him in check.

Soncy, at least, gets serious when Will comes close enough for the two of them to see the distress on his face. That much Will doesn't have to fake.

"There's something wrong with Jed," he tells them, and points back towards the house, and the two of them get moving in a hurry.

Will trails after his uncles, and when they have both gone inside he looks to where he knows Hannibal and D are watching him, and points for the treeline. Then follows them into the house.

The sun is sinking from the sky when Will emerges from the house, perhaps ten minutes later.

He crosses the field towards them slowly, the limp more pronounced than ever, and Hannibal can see the weight of exhaustion riding on his narrow shoulders. Once, before Will reaches them, he lifts his hand to touch the side of his face as though it pains him.

When he comes closer Hannibal can see why; the left side of his face is a livid red.

Hardly thinking about what he is doing, Hannibal reaches out and touches the side of Will's face, turning his head so he can see the mark more clearly; it bears the blurred shape of a huge hand. He has a split lip, too, and is bleeding.

The boy leans into the touch like an affection starved puppy, but when Hannibal says, "Which of them struck you?" Will pulls away quickly, confused and a little frightened by the quiet fury in Hannibal's voice.

"I got underfoot and that got me knocked upside the head and told to go play outside."

"Clever boy," Hannibal says again, and is taken by surprise by Will's grin - it's the expression of a child who has gotten away with something and is pleased with himself because of it.

Then Hannibal asks, "And how is your uncle?" and the smile withers up and dies.

"Dizzy," he says. "And confused. He was bleeding out of his ears."

Hannibal is quite certain that Alana fractured the man's skull, perhaps in multiple places. Absent proper medical care, Hannibal would not risk money on his odds of survival.

"How much pain is he in?"

"He doesn't..." Will says, and then hesitates. The tip of his tongue snakes out nervously, worrying at his cracked lip. "I don't think he really feels pain. None of them do. They don't seem to *understand* what pain is."

Congenital analgesia, Hannibal thinks. What he says is, "But that's not true of you, is it, Will?"

“No,” Will says. “I know what hurting feels like.

“Come on,” Will tells them, and starts to climb the steep incline that leads deeper into the woods.

D bounces forward and clasps Will’s hand in his own. Hannibal follows closely behind, so Will does not have to raise his voice to talk to him as they hike onward.

“You can’t have your car back,” Will says. “They might see that it’s missing and ask questions later. But there are some older cars that still run. I don’t think they will notice one of those missing, there’s so many of them.”

“If they open the luggage they’ll see that the driver of the Prius wasn’t traveling alone,” Hannibal says. “Will that make trouble for you - place either of you at a risk?”

“I don’t think they’ll bother,” Will says, and then comes to a halt, wincing.

He shakes his hand free from D’s grasp and bends over to rub at the calf muscle of his poorly healed leg.

D is staring at him worriedly, and Will says, “Can you go find me a good walking stick? My leg is acting up on me.”

When D is out of earshot, Will says, “It used to be that the family would waylay travelers from time to time. That’s always been the way, even since back before my Papaw was born. They’d kill to punish trespassers who wore out their welcome, or so they could rob them of whatever they were traveling with. They would kill to get *things* they wanted or needed - trucks and clothing and money that they could trade for other things in the city.

“But now they’re just killing to kill. They don’t care about anything else.”

“They have no other reasons?”

Will isn’t in the mood to play coy. “You know why. You saw.”

Hannibal doesn’t deny that. “Sometimes you have to eat what you can catch,” he echoes back at Will.

The boy narrows his eyes. “Why doesn’t that upset you?” he demands. “I know enough to know that most people would be more upset by the idea that we’re eating them than by the murders themselves. Why aren’t you more worried about them doing that to your friend, killing her ugly and eating her - or of that happening to *you*?”

“Those are valid questions.”

“I know that there’s something wrong with my uncles, and with me. And I can see things starting to go wrong in D already. But I guess there’s something wrong with you, too.”

“Back at the house - was that the first time you’ve killed someone?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“Are you?”

Hannibal’s own feelings about what he saw through the flyspecked window are not considerably different from how he might have responded to witnessing the boy being forced into sex.

He would like to tell Will, “That could have been empowering and enjoyable for you instead of something deeply traumatic, had you been old enough to handle the situation and if it had been your own choice,” but there are too many junctures in that statement that might cause Will to balk, and too great a risk that the boy will either fail to credit his sincerity or else be frightened by it.

Sticking to practicalities, Hannibal says instead, “I thought to interfere, but I wasn’t sure if you would thank me for causing harm to your family.”

Will’s lower teeth show when he twists his mouth up in a snarl. “I’d’ve killed you too if you tried to hurt any of them.”

Hannibal does not respond to the threat. Instead, he looks past Will and says, “Here’s D, back again.”

Will snorts and turns to meet his brother. He takes the stout stick from the smaller boy and they begin to move forward again, though this time Hannibal hangs further back.

Watching Will limp his way up the incline, Hannibal imagines that satisfaction that would come from rebreaking the boy’s leg on the operating table and putting it back to rights.

“The junkyard is just up there,” Will stops to tell Hannibal, when they are perhaps ten yards from the top of the ridge. “It’s all open space up there, and they might be looking around to see if anyone’s following the road. Wait here.”

Hannibal does as instructed, allowing the boys to go on without him. He sits down on an overturned tree trunk, the better to stay out of sight, and perhaps ten minutes later he hears the faint stutter of a stubborn old engine, turning over and then coming to life.

Will appears at the top of the incline, waving at Hannibal to come on, and Hannibal rises to his feet to do just that.

It would embarrass Hannibal to admit that, when the arrow strikes him, he never even saw it coming.

SO pleased to have this one finished and posted and even more excited for the next two!

Chapter 10

Hannibal drops to his knees, and as his fingers close around the thick arrow shaft that now protrudes from his belly he hears high-pitched laughter ring out over the trees, seeming to echo all around him.

Will looks down on him from the top of the ridge, wide-eyed with shock. D hides behind his brother, too scared to even look at Hannibal.

Then Will bolts, dragging D with him by the arm, and they disappear into the brush.

The lights are on in the shed when Will and D venture down to the homeplace again.

From their hiding place behind the treeline they can see forms moving around between the gaps in the wall, twisted shadows spilling out through the cracks between the wooden planks and out into the night.

“We should go help him,” D says.

“No,” Will says, feeling his own barely acknowledged hopes that maybe Hannibal could help *them* fade away like the fluttering of a dying moth’s wings. “It won’t make any difference now.”

He doesn’t want D going anywhere near whatever has been done to Hannibal. D already knows far more about what goes on in that shed than Will ever wanted him to learn, and Will is still struggling to parse the impact that knowledge has had on his little brother.

Will remembers what happened last fall, on the night when he slipped away from the waylaid SUV he and D were sleeping in to come down the hill and crouch in these same bushes to listen as his uncles cut on a man that Will himself lured into their grasp. He’d sat very still, except for the shivering that he could not control, and listened to the stranger screaming like a stuck pig and begging to be allowed to die and the lonesome desolate sobbing that followed when his uncles went away to do something else for a while.

He was listening to all of that, and trying to understand how hearing it made him feel, when he caught sight of D walking with tentative curiosity towards the open shed door, his head cocked to the side as he peered at what was in there.

Will tripped over his own bad leg running for D, and then got up again and kept going. He grabbed D by the arm and jerked him out and away from the shed so violently that D yelped like a kicked dog and started to cry, and once Will dragged him back behind the safety of the treeline he demanded, as angry and ashamed as he’d ever been, what D was doing there, but by then D was sobbing so hard that he could barely breathe - something about how his face was put together made him choke whenever his nose got to running and that was happening

worse than Will had ever seen except when he was still a baby - and Will made him lean forward because sometimes that seemed to help, and he pounded on D's back and tried to think of things to say to calm him down while D dripped and choked and hyperventilated, and by the time the tears had mostly dried up and he was able to get his breath to talk again it slowly began to dawn on Will how little D's breakdown had to do with what was in the shed.

The man in the shed, hanging up by his arms and already three quarters of the way dead but alive enough to lift his head and *look* as Will pulled D away, distressed him hardly more than a deer carcass hung up to bleed out might have. It didn't upset D because it wasn't at all outside of the norm of what he'd spent the last seven years surrounded by, and Will understood then that he hadn't been able to protect his brother, that there were already calluses growing over where his feelings ought to be, and that it would only get worse with time.

But D needed him.

That was why he cried so hard.

He'd woken up alone, frightened of the dark and badly confused about where Will had gone, and eventually he'd ventured out and came down the hill to the homeplace and was drawn to the bright light of the shed's naked bulbs and the curious noises that were coming from inside, and when he'd gone to look Will had come out of the darkness and grabbed him hard - had *hurt* him - and he'd been *so angry* that D was afraid not just that Will was going to hurt him more, maybe beat him the way the uncles sometimes would, but that he had somehow without knowing done something so bad Will wasn't going to like him anymore.

D started crying again when he confessed that, pleading with Will not to hate him and tripping over his own apologies as he promised that he wouldn't be bad anymore, that he wouldn't do anything else to make Will mad, and please he was sorry for being so bad so please just don't be angry anymore please don't -

And by then Will's uncles were on their way back to the shed and Will didn't want from them to hear D, nor to sit here any longer and watch how unaffected D was by the screams when they started up again. So Will picked him up, D's arms tangled around his neck to hold on, and carried him back up the hill as best he could, though D wasn't that much smaller than Will himself.

He's going to be big, Will thought, as he made his way up the hill, and that made him think of his uncles again - of Soncy and Jed, because Wasco was small like Will - and wonder how little difference, really, might remain between them and D by the time he was finished growing up.

But now there are no screams coming from the shed, and that's how Will knows that Hannibal is already dead.

If he were still alive, Will is quite sure, they would be giving him something worth screamed about.

After a while Wasco leaves the shed, and in the light of the moon the blood on his hands looks quite black. He pauses at the water pump to clean his hands before he goes inside, giggling to himself at the feeling of the cold water on his skin.

There's more laughter, coming to Will through the screen door, but it's a nervous kind of laughing that quickly turns into shouting that sends Soncy lumbering out of the shed and into the house himself.

A few minutes later, Soncy comes out and bellows for Will.

"Don't go," D pleads, grabbing at Will's hands, but Will is scared about what might be happening in the house down below, and more than that he knows that if he doesn't come Soncy is just as likely to take it out of D's hide as Will's own.

"Stay here until I come and get you," Will says, and goes down to meet Soncy in the dooryard, where he catches a backhanded crack against the side of his head that almost sends him reeling.

"Jed's hurt," Soncy says, and Will wonders if Soncy has cottoned to the idea that Will has some role in that or if he just hit Will because he was convenient. Past precedent says the latter, as does what Soncy says next.

He points to the shed and says, "Go keep watch on the stranger," and all at once Will's heart rises to his throat and tries to crowd in behind his liver to hide.

Will doesn't know what he's feeling as he steps into the shed to look Hannibal in the eyes again.

He's hurt - they have been hurting him - and he's bound at the wrists and ankles, and Will cannot for the life of him say if it is hope or guilt or something else that is squirming around inside his belly like a ball of writhing snakes when a pleased smile appears on Hannibal's bloodied lips and he says, in a perfectly natural tone of voice, "Hello, Will."

Chapter 11

Will expected Hannibal to beg for help - or maybe try to bargain - but he doesn't.

That failure only compounds Will's sense of confusion, and looking up at Hannibal's smiling face, Will is suddenly desperately angry - angry, and hurt in a way that he doesn't understand, and through tightly clenched teeth he says furiously, "You dragged yourself into this. I told you to *leave*."

And he is shouting now, conscious of the box of tools on the floor beside him and wondering what the uncles will do if they come back out here to find Hannibal's head lolling limply beneath a cut throat, escaped with Will's aide beneath the shadow of death, "You were *supposed to leave*!"

"It's all right, Will," Hannibal says calmly. "You did the best you could."

The praise feels like a slap to the face, though Will does not believe it to be intended that way. It shames him all the more.

Wasco and Soncy have left Hannibal bound up with his arms tied together at the wrists and pulled up over his head by a heavy length of rope that is attached to a pulley near the roof of the shed. His legs are tied too. Ropes around each of his ankles are anchored to spikes in the floor, forcing him into a wide stance.

That much alone must be agony, just from the simple strain on his muscles, but of course the uncles have been hurting him other ways, too. Will doesn't want to inventory it all, the map of the bruises and wounds that have already been placed on Hannibal's body, which has been striped down to his boxers, nor does he want to consider all that is to come, but he can't help himself.

They have been burning him, mostly, and the shape of the ancient hog brand, left over from long ago when the family still had hogs and neighbors that might try to claim them as their own, marks his skin in at least half a dozen places.

Those burns don't bode well, Will thinks. They suggest to him that his uncles want to take their sweet time with Hannibal, and are intentionally limiting the risk of him bleeding out.

That hasn't kept them from slicing a long strip skin away from along the length of Hannibal's bicep. Will knows without needing to think about it that it was Wasco who did that; he likes to feed his brothers, and Jed has always been partial to cracklings. He must have taken it inside to cook it up for Jed, but then found whatever it was he found inside the house that set him to screaming and Soncy to running.

Then there's the arrow, too. It is still sticking out of Hannibal's belly, over to the right side and a little above the jut of his hipbone, though someone has broken off the arrow head and part of the shaft.

“I’m supposed to watch you,” Will tells him regretfully. “Until they come back.”

He sits down on the floor, lowering himself gingerly and trying to bite back the whimper at the burning broken-glass ache that is his bad leg. Will feels guilty, responding to his own pain like that, when Hannibal handled himself so well up to this point and still has so much further to go.

“I appreciate the company,” Hannibal says, and there is a bright - almost cheerful - spark dancing in his eyes when he looks down at Will, and Will is shocked to realize that there is *something* about all of this that Hannibal is somehow *enjoying* .

Is it me? a quiet voice wonders, somewhere in the back of his mind. *Is it talking to me that makes him happy, despite everything?*

Annoyed at the silliness of the thought, Will shakes his head ruefully and pushes it away.

Hannibal looks bad, for all his apparent good humor. If it’s company he wants, that’s something that Will can at least give him, but he isn’t sure what he ought to say next.

“Tell me about your uncles,” Hannibal asks Will, and solves that problem for him.

“Wasco - the smaller of the three? I guess he was our favorite,” Will says, unconscious of his own use of the past tense. “He can climb trees like a chipmunk, despite the way his back is, and he always finds something worth laughing at.

“He used to be fun to be around. He’d play with me, when I was real little, and then later with D too, and he was always good at coming up with games, and sometimes he still is...”

“But?” Hannibal prods gently.

“But more and more his idea of playing has gotten too rough... more and more the games and jokes haven’t been funny, just cruel and scary.”

Will remembers clinging to the tree branch and begging - screaming - for Wasco to stop shaking it - and Will remembers the wild laughter that followed him all the way down as he seemed to fall forever.

He shakes his head like there’s a flea in his ear, trying to push the memory away.

“Sometimes it can still feel like the old days,” Will says, unsure of if he’s lying and if so who he is trying to convince - himself or Hannibal. “He can still be good to us - to me and D. Sometimes.

“He took care of me when I was little, after my Mama died,” Will tells him. “And he showed me how to take care of D.”

“Not D’s mother?” Hannibal asks, and Will narrows his eyes. “Why did his care fall to you?”

Anger spiking as though he’s been accused of something, Will says, “He’s my brother. ‘Course I take care of him.”

“It seems to me that you’ve taken fine care of him, Will, given the circumstances. No one could have reasonably expected you to do better.”

The words stun Will, hit him where he is most vulnerable. He doesn’t know how to reply.

Hannibal makes it easy for him by changing the subject. “And the big gentleman who had the unfortunate encounter with the toilet tank lid?”

Will can’t help but smile at that, because he thinks it must be the first time *any* of his uncles have been referred to as a ‘gentleman.’

“Jed’s simple,” Will says. “Mostly, he just does what he thinks his brothers want him to do - it makes him happy to make them happy.

“He took a liking to D, right from when he was a little baby, and I think maybe that was because they both have the cleft lips, and then as D’s gotten older it seems more and more likely that he’s gonna be huge like Jed.

“I think it’s made Jed feel like D was his own.”

“Isn’t he?”

“I already told you -”

“Yes, the dead parents,” Hannibal agrees in a voice that is almost bored. “My apologies. Please go on.”

“Jed was always someone who could go from pulling funny faces to make you laugh to backhanding you against the wall, and it’s always been hard to tell if he’s feeling nice or nasty, and that’s always changed on a dime... but over the last few years things have started to slip - not just for Jed but with all of them - and he’s been mean almost all the time.

“That’s been hard for D. He doesn’t understand what changed, and for a long time he kept hoping that if he found a way to make Jed happy with him that things would be as good as they sometimes used to be.”

“Hoping for one more good day that never came,” Hannibal says, thoughtful. “One last smile or word of praise, just one more pat on the head for old time’s sake.”

“He didn’t want to give up on it,” Will says. “That’s a big part of why we stopped spending time at the house and started sleeping up in the scrapyard.”

Will doesn’t say that his own child’s heart longed to be missed, on that first night that they stayed away from home and for many nights afterwards. There was a part of him that was sure at least Wasco would come looking for them to make sure they were safe, and when none of them even seemed to notice that Will and D barely ever came home anymore, (except when they wanted Will to play the bait on a hunt), something in Will hardened and started to wither away.

Foolish to want so badly something he'll never have, and Will tries to push the tangle of feelings away by shifting to the topic of the last of his uncles.

"Soncy can get soft with his brothers, but not anybody else - not even his own Daddy. They were in a mental asylum when they were about the same ages and me and D are now, and they all got hurt in that place, but Soncy was the oldest and he was always trying to shield the other two, so he got punished the hardest and most often."

"The two of you have that in common," Hannibal says.

"They cooked his brain up inside his skull," Will tells him. "Tied him down to a table and shoved cotton in his mouth and did that to him again and again and again."

"Electroconvulsive therapy," Hannibal says. "Barbaric."

"I think that's why he spent as much time working over that Fredrick as they did... they found out he was a psychiatrist, somehow. They don't like psychiatrists."

"Worse luck for me, then, and Alana if they catch her."

"They'll catch her. No one ever gets away."

Hannibal says, "I think that you'd like to try getting away yourself - you and little D. Would you like for me to help you to do that?"

Will hesitates, entertaining for a few seconds a useless dream of leaving here for literally anywhere else. Then he shakes his head regretfully.

"You aren't going to get away either. You might have sneaked by, back before they knew you were here, but it's too late for that now."

"You're already dead, and I'm sorry for that, but I can't put my brother in any more danger just for a stranger's sake."

They're going to hurt you a lot more before it's all said and done, Will thinks. Maybe worse than they've ever hurt anymore before, as payback for what's happened to Jed, but he doesn't say that. Saying that seems cruel.

And anyway, he thinks Hannibal must already know that.

Chapter 12

Will told D to stay hidden, but he's been gone for a long time now, and D doesn't like being alone in the dark.

He creeps towards the comfort of the light spilling out through the open shed door, and is rewarded by the murmuring sound of Will's voice from inside.

Then he hears Hannibal reply, and for a moment D grins big, but then the smile falters, because Will told him the man was already dead.

D accepted the truth of that in the same way he accepts the rest of the chaotic brutality that defines his everyday life. The news wounded him, but D has no standard by which to envision a life in which he is not constantly being subjected to new wounds.

He understands more about his family's way of life than Will, even in the deepest pits of his own despairing doubts about his ability to protect D from the truth, realizes. It is all just so commonplace to the boy that it seems natural that it hardly merits discussion, much less registers to him as outrageous.

Nonetheless, when he sees Hannibal, tied up and bloody and bruised, D doesn't hesitate.

There's no considered thought process behind it - no weighing of risks or consequences, and no moral judgment.

It is simply that Hannibal has been nice to him, and to his brother, and D wants to help him.

He hurries forward, going past Will, and begins to worry at the rope binding one of Hannibal's ankles. But D can't figure out how to work the tight knots, and he says, "Help me!" but Will seems frozen, so D starts to look around for something he can use to cut the ropes.

There's a tool box on the ground a few feet away from Hannibal, and D peers into it and sees sharp objects - rusty files and old pliers and various kinds of blades. Some of the tools are red with fresh blood - Hannibal's blood, he thinks - and D doesn't want to touch them, but he reaches into the toolbox anyway, and -

And Will grips him by the arm hard - so hard it *hurts* - and D says, "Ow!" and tries to shake him off, but Will only squeezes tighter, and now he's pulling D away from the toolbox.

"Get out of here," Will snarls at him. "You *can't* be in here!"

"Let go!" D tells him, and digs his heels in, and when Will tries to pull him forward D doesn't budge.

No one is more surprised by this development than D himself, and with it comes a sudden realization; *I'm at least as strong as he is*. Will is thin and pallid and utterly wrung out by

pain and stress, and if D refuses go along Will might not be able to make him, and that discovery might be as frightening in its implications for Will as it for D, because he sees Will ball his other fist, as though to lash out and hit, and on instinct D tries to jerk his arm free to shy away.

“You’re *hurting* me,” D yells, and at the same time Hannibal says calmly, “Will.”

Looking stricken, Will drops D’s arm and takes a shaky step backwards.

There is something wrong with Will - something is breaking, or else ready to snap - and seeing that scares D as badly as he’s ever been scared.

Hannibal says D’s name, and when he turns to look at him Hannibal says, “Can you help me with something, D?”

D nods eagerly, thinking that Hannibal will give him clear instructions on how to get him free, but the man doesn’t say what he expects.

“I’m terribly thirsty,” Hannibal says, an apologetic note in his voice. “Could you get me something to drink, please?”

It is a confusing request, one which even the boy can tell reflects a bafflingly misaligned set of priorities, even if D does not recognize the ulterior motive behind it. But Will is floundering, and D is entirely in over his head and desperate to be given direction, so he says, “Alright!” and turns for the door.

“D?” Hannibal says, stopping him at the threshold. D turns back to look at him. “Not tap water, please, if you can avoid it.”

D isn’t sure what the phrase ‘tap water’ means, and he frowns and looks at Will.

“He doesn’t want to drink our water because it’s dirty,” Will explains, too numb to really be spiteful. “Getting sick ought to be the least of his worries, but see what bottled drinks we have left up in the junkyard.”

Will doesn’t look at him as he says this, and a vague and barely conscious suspicion scratches at the side of D’s skull - they are both just trying to get rid of him.

But he does as he’s told anyway, braving the dark woods with only the benefit of the moonlight to make his way back up to the junkyard, where he finds in one of the more recently acquired cars some pineapple strawberry flavored la croix and a half-empty bottle of coke that hasn’t gone completely flat.

He is about to head back down to the shed when the same stubbornness that made him refuse to leave the shed when Will told him to do so comes over him again, and he walks over to the old VW microbus where Will hides some of his most valuable finds.

There’s a small collection of hoarded first aid kits in the back, and D takes the biggest and newest looking one and tucks it under his arm before heading back down to the shed.

Hannibal waits a little while before he speaks, watching Will watching D through the gaps in the wall as the boy makes his way up the trail.

“Is he gone?” Hannibal asks, unnecessarily.

“Yeah.”

It’s good to be able to speak more frankly now, once the smaller boy has been sent out on his task. Earlier, Hannibal hadn’t been certain if D might be hiding somewhere close, listening.

“Will,” Hannibal asks, “just where did you get that child?”

Chapter 13

It'll take D about half an hour to make his way up to the junkyard and back again, if he hurries the way Will figures he'll be hurrying.

Will is surprised to find that it takes less than half that long to answer Hannibal's question. He has long dreaded the idea of explaining to D what happened, but he's never considered laying the narrative out for a stranger.

"I was about six, I guess," he tells Hannibal, and it is just that - a guess. No one, to Will's knowledge, has ever kept count of his birthdays.

"I was already working as bait back then, but not the same way I did with... the man I killed," he goes on, shying away from saying Fredrick's name. Right now Will feels like he would choke on it.

"They'd take people down on Bear Mountain Road back then, not on the dirt road that goes up to the house, and I guess that was a lot more dangerous - they couldn't know for sure how many people were in the car before they stopped it, or if they had guns and there was always a risk that another car would come down the road while they were still busy and make things complicated."

"How has your role in the business come to change?"

"I hitchhike now," Will says, not wanting to go into further detail. And anyway, Hannibal is nodding in a way that seems to say Will has confirmed something he'd already worked out for himself.

"Back then, if my uncles saw a car that looked good coming, they'd have me walk out into the road and just stand there.

"They always stopped."

Will was small, and he looked almost completely normal, and it didn't take any acting for him to seem forlorn and distressed.

Even the ones that were cautious enough to hesitate in getting out of their cars stopped long enough to be shot through the windows, Will tells Hannibal, though usually his uncles liked to get in closer than that when they could.

Sometimes, when they saw his uncles closing in on them from among the trees they would try to pick Will up and take him.

It was a protecting instinct in some of the people, and Will understands now that they thought his uncles were hunting him too and were trying to save him, even though doing so slowed them down and reduced their already abysmal odds of getting away down to a flat zero.

Others made the connection between Will and his family, and realized that they'd been trapped, and wanted to take him hostage to try to save their own lives.

At the time, the first response was as frightening to Will as the other.

"They scared me," Will says. "I was scared for them and *of* them."

There were a lot of people in the van that stopped that day - more than his uncles counted on, maybe - and for a while everything was a chaos of shouting and screams and Wasco's wild laughter, and Will wanted to run away and hide from all of it, but he was *so hungry* ...

Sometimes his uncles would forget to feed him, and sometimes there just wasn't anything to eat, and Will was hungry down into his bones and so he ducked into the emptied van while his uncles were still busy killing its fleeing occupants, hoping to find a candy bar or bag of chips or some stale french fries or *anything*.

Instead, he found a baby.

The baby was small and soft, and when Will worked out how to undo the straps of his car seat and picked him up he discovered that the baby's wispy dark hair smelled so good and clean, and his face looked the way that Will thought his own face out to look - like the face of someone who belonged in the family.

It felt almost like the two of them had gotten switched around somehow, and that Will ought to be the one sitting in the crippled van waiting for the men outside to get around to killing him.

Will climbed down from the van, carrying the baby against his chest like a heavy teddy bear, and slipped into the woods with him while his uncles were still busy.

Behind him, a woman's screams range out over the rest of the noise and chaos.

"Andy!" she screamed, and Will thought maybe that she was screaming like that because she'd caught him stealing her baby, so he ran faster.

The woman screamed the name three more times and then the screams weren't words anymore and then, eventually, the screams stopped.

"That was why I figured his name was Andy, which broke down to D, her screaming it, but later I wondered if maybe I was wrong about that. Maybe she was screaming for her man or her brother. Maybe she wasn't even D's mamma, and that screaming had nothing to do with D after all. I dunno."

"What did you do then?"

"We hid in the woods. I hid with the baby, all night.

"Wasco came around and found me after the sun came up."

By then, the baby had lost a lot of his pep, but Will's growing dread that the chilly night air or lack of food was going to kill him anyway didn't override his terror of turning the baby over to his uncle, who Will was sure would kill him.

But Wasco was just about as gentle as he was capable of being, prying at Will's arms to get the baby from him, and when he turned the baby around and saw his face he burst out in a genuinely delighted chain of giggles.

"Lil bat face," he said, still laughing to himself, and Will grinned himself because it was such a relief to have the friendly version of his favorite uncle back for a change, helping Will with the stolen baby just for the fun novelty of it.

Wasco bundled the baby up under his jacket so only D's head poked out, and then he'd taken Will by the hand and they'd walked back to the junkyard together to retrieve the diaper bag from the van, and when Wasco couldn't work out exactly how the special bottles worked they took the baby to Will's Papaw.

"He showed me how to feed a baby with a cleft palate, the same way he did with Jed when he was a lil'un."

Hannibal asks, "Where is your grandfather now?"

"He doesn't live here anymore," Will says, which is the truth. Maynard got fed up with his boys years ago, and moved into his gas station down at the foot of the mountain.

"They let me keep him," Will concludes, "but they never did warm to him like he was kin."

He is afraid to say that he is increasingly aware of how the ember of whatever love his uncles might have once held for himself has faded away to a dull spark, or to speak of how worried he has become that the uncles might someday soon kill either one of them.

Will thinks Hannibal can see that fear, though. Being regarded by Hannibal now feels like there is a bee buzzing around inside his skull, gathering up all Will's secrets.

"He's a good natured child," Hannibal says. "Eager to please. And I can see that you've worked hard to look out for him. D eats better than you do, doesn't he?"

"We get by on our own," Will says, trying to throw up some kind of defense, but it's no good. The praise hits him like a blow to the belly. Will has never had that kind of reassurance before, and it leaves him starving for another scrap of approval, and something else, too, that Will can't quite name.

Help, maybe.

Hannibal looks down at Will's upturned, fraught face. Emotions stutter across that face - fear and doubt, wounded shame and defensive anger, and beneath it all... hope that doesn't quite dare to hope.

Hannibal tells him, "This place will ruin D."

Will winces, but then he bares up under the pain.

"I know it. That's what I'm afraid of."

"What's worse, you'll end up being a part of that. You wanted to use your hands on him a few minutes ago, when he defied you, didn't you?"

"I've never hit him," Will says quickly. "I've never hurt him - not on purpose," but Hannibal can almost see D's pained objections to Will trying to drag him out of the shed, not twenty minutes earlier, playing behind Will's eyelids.

Hannibal keeps his voice calm and nonaccusatory. He is cognizant that his own life, and much else besides, rests upon his ability to convince Will of what he has to offer.

"No, but he scared you so badly that you wanted to.

"That's what should worry you, Will, more than anything else - that this place, and your uncles, will taint you with their own brutality until you're too vicious and numb to be any good for D. Then he'll really be in trouble, because he won't have anyone to protect him anymore."

The reality of that hits Will hard enough for Hannibal to know that he has only articulated a truth that Will already dreaded.

The tears are not entirely surprising, but unfortunately Hannibal is currently in no position to do anything about them beyond waiting it out. Will cries silently, swiping with an angry fist at his eyes.

The boy is cunning and uncannily bright, especially given his circumstances, and he is all too knowledgeable about a host of things no child should know, but Will is, at the end of the day, a child.

He was never really any match for Hannibal.

"What should I do?" Will asks, when he's more or less wrestled the tears back under control. His voice is dull, and Hannibal wonders when the boy last slept.

"Cut one of my hands free," Hannibal tells him, "and then give me the knife."

"I can't hurt my family," Will says. "I won't do that."

"You won't have to," Hannibal says, and means it in good faith. "I'll take care of whatever needs taken care of, should that come up."

Will runs his lower lip between his teeth. "And then what?"

"We'll leave here, the three of us. I'd be pleased to welcome you and your brother into my home, Will."

The boy hesitates, struggling to decide if he can trust that, and then he reaches into the toolbox and picks up a blade.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Really quickly, if anyone wants a short and entertaining introduction to the Wrong Turn series without having to commit to watching the entire film/series, James A. Janisse is doing some really cool film summaries here for his Kill Count series.

Here's the one for the first movie, which provides some nice background in terms of what the house and the junkyard look like, as well as information on what Will's uncles look/sound like (you gotta hear Three-Finger/Wasco laughing for yourself) - <https://youtu.be/0num7Zb4iu4> .

Stretching up to reach the ropes that bind Hannibal's right wrist, Will balances precariously on the tiptoes of his good leg while he saws at it with the knife. The blade of that knife is brown with the flaking blood of some long dead stranger, but it cuts well enough to eventually sever the thick cords.

Hannibal jerks his newly freed arm sharply to regain circulation, snapping the wrist back and forth, and flexes his fingers.

Then he holds his hand out of the knife.

Will turns it over to him.

Outside, a howling rises up on the night air, cutting through the walls of the shed and deep into Will's bones, hysterical laughter with absolutely nothing funny about it, and Will begins to tremble.

The screen door bangs against the side of the house, and Will peers through the shed's wooden slates and sees Soncy and Wasco coming for them.

Will looks back to Hannibal, desperate in his own uncertain dread, and Hannibal seems to feel Will's eyes on him. He looks up from his efforts to cut his left hand free, and tells him, "Go outside. Stall them if you can."

Will stands with his back to the closed shed door and watches as his uncles walk toward him, his heart thudding sickly in his chest.

Wasco's howling has turned to whimpers, and he stumbles unsteadily after his brother, but Soncy moves like something that is made from stone.

Will forces himself to step forward to meet them.

He already knows, of course.

He knew the instant that Wasco started screaming, but that knowledge does little to soften the blow when Soncy growls at him, “Jed’s dead.”

The part of Will that knows Jed never treated him right is disgusted by his own grief, but he cannot avoid feeling it. Aside from D, his uncles are the only family that Will has ever known, and the sense of loss that hits him now, as he works to set into motion events that may still get the other two killed, is not something he can easily shake.

For their part, Wasco and Soncy are gearing up to take their own grief out on Hannibal’s living flesh, and when Will doesn’t get out of his way, Soncy knocks him to the side.

He stumbles and falls to his knees, and when he looks up through the limp hair dangling over his eyes he sees Soncy reach for the shed door.

“Wait!” Will says, trying to scramble back to his feet. “He didn’t do it!”

Soncy jerks him up off the ground by the front of his overalls and brings him level to his face. The left side of his face is wet from tears, but there's nothing merciful in his single eye as it pries at Will.

“There was another person with him - a woman,” Will stammers. “I saw her inside the house before Jed was hurt, and then later I saw her running off toward Bear Mountain Road.”

Soncy drops Will. He lands wrong on his bad leg, and grinds his teeth together, biting back a scream. “She’s getting away,” Will tells Soncy, almost spitefully. “She’s going to *tell* .”

Wasco leans in over him, hands resting on his knees and head cocked to the side, and asks suspiciously, “Why didn’t you tell us about this before?”

Will blows up.

Later, he will not be able to recall exactly what he said or in what order he said it. What will stand out in the boy’s memory instead will be his own anger and the slack bafflement with which his uncles greeted it, and the sharp ache in his throat, like something tearing, that built as he screamed at them.

“I was trying to,” Will says, and at first his voice is fairly calm - even plaintive - but then he continues, “but you wouldn’t let me - Soncy *hit me* when I tried,” and even though this is technically a lie there’s an emotional verity to it that frees the way for things previously unsaid and which rest closer to core of Will’s heart's truth, in the same way that a knife permits blood to hemorrhage from an open wound, and he is shouting now, *screaming* about how they are always *hurting* him for no reason and now *tired* he is of being hurt and of trying to keep them from hurting D and how miserable and foul it is to be constantly surrounded by all the hurting they cause and how much he *hates* them for making him a part of that on top of everything else.

Eventually, the words dry up, and Will stands, panting, his fists balled at his sides, watching them to see if they understood anything of what he has said.

It can be difficult for a child to turn on his family, no matter how undeserving they may be of his allegiance, and Will is in his bones a loyal creature. Will might have changed his mind about helping Hannibal then, might have turned his back on the stranger and warned them that he was armed and likely free, had his uncles give him anything - the slightest sign of affection or remorse, or even just some indication that they'd been listening - in response to what was ultimately a last ditch effort to reach out to them.

Instead, Wasco blinks at him, too baffled at Will's outburst to even giggle, and Soncy snarls briefly, and then the two of them turn away from Will and begin to discuss what to do about the strangers.

They believe Will about the woman, at least, and quickly decide that Wasco ought to go after her while Soncy stays behind to continue working the man over.

Forgotten, Will stands alone, watching Wasco loping away back toward the truck while Soncy enters the shed.

The door closes behind him, and Will could look through the slates and see at least some of what Soncy might be seeing, but now that he's sent his uncle into the lion's den he doesn't want to look.

He focuses on Wasco's retreating hunched shoulders, begging him silently to keep going. Will is finding that he can accept the idea that Hannibal might this very instant be quietly killing Soncy, but he doesn't want Wasco to die.

On the other side of the door, Hannibal cries out in what sounds like profound agony.

Wasco looks back at the shed, and Will sees a flash of something - curiosity, or maybe suspicion - over the fact that Hannibal is at last beginning to make some noise.

Then Hannibal cries out again, an outraged roar that turns into a weak scream as he runs out of breath, and Wasco shrugs one crooked shoulder and turns away.

He climbs into the truck and drives away, heading down the mountain, but Will, who knows that Hannibal only made those noises to mask the sounds of whatever he was doing to Soncy, waits outside until he is called for.

The body is almost completely unmarked.

"What did you do to him?" Will says, keeping his distance.

"He might not have been able to feel pain," Hannibal says, and his voice is so hoarse that Will thinks he really does need the water he sent D off to fetch, "but asphyxiation comes with its own set of terrors."

Will creeps closer, trying to understand what he is feeling around the rushing inside his head, and sees the ligature marks on Soncy's throat, and then the burst blood vessels in his eye.

Without knowing beforehand what he is going to do, Will screams, all of the pent up rage and hurt roaring out of him, and he kicks the body as hard as he can, and then again and again and

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And Hannibal takes him by the shoulders and turns him around, and suddenly Will is curled in his arms, sobbing against his chest as though he is nothing more or less than an innocent child, baffled by the viciousness of the world and in desperate need of protection.

Chapter 15

Alana *almost* gets away.

It takes most of the night, stumbling through the woods in the darkness rather than risking discovery along the road, and several times she gets turned around or loses her bearing, but finally she makes it back to the gas station at the base of the mountain - the last stop she and Hannibal made before everything started to go so wrong.

Now, the lights are all off, and when Alana tugs at the front door it refuses to open. The glass of the transom window mounted in the top half of the door is opaque with grease and fly dirt.

She looks back over her shoulder, staring into the shadows, hesitant to make noise - her own ragged breathing is intolerably loud already - but then she turns back to the door and knocks, tentatively at first and then with the side of her balled fist, and when no one answers she casts about on the ground until she finds half of a broken brick.

Alana picks the brick up and uses it to break through the filthy window, and when the glass shatters and falls away she sees a man, his face skull-like in the shadows - standing on the other side.

Watching her.

He turns on the lights, and the scream that was perched at the edge of Alana's throat fades, because the man on the other side of the door looks completely harmless - or at least, as compared to what she's been dealing with lately.

The old man has a weak jaw and a wrinkled forehead, and she recognizes him as the person who was sitting under the dubious shade of the station's awning, chugging peptisol like it was beer, back when she and Hannibal stopped there for gas, what felt like a lifetime ago.

Swinging the door open, the man stands in the threshold and looks out at her with blinking, blood-shot eyes. "What in goodness sake is all this commotion about?" he asks, and Alana sees that he is almost entirely toothless. The three teeth he has left are yellowed and worn down to nubs.

"I need to call the police," Alana says.

The old man frowns. "Why, it's the middle of the night," he says.

"There's been a murder," she tells him. And with considerably more calm than she is actually feeling, Alana adds, "Maybe more than one murder."

"A murder?" he repeats, making no move to let her inside. "You don't say?"

Alana is cognizant of herself as an easy target, standing under the light in the open space, and she steps inside, assuming that the man will get out of her way, and he does fall back.

It takes her a minute, looking around the dim and dusty interior of the shop, to spot the phone. It's a massive rotary phone, probably older than Alana is herself, and its plastic body is yellowed.

Wondering if it even still works - and not at all certain if she knows how to work it - Alana heads for it.

From behind her, the old man says, "Wait just a minute now, young lady."

Alana turns back to him. "I'm going to call 911."

"Nah, nah," he tells her, soothingly. "You don't want to do that."

"They killed my friend. I have to call the police."

"I know it, I heard you the first time," he says, and now there's a bite of meanness in his voice. Under normal circumstances it might have put Alana on edge, that tone, but she is too wound up and worn down and too focused on the idea that at any moment the pack of deformed mountain men might descend on the gas station to pay much heed to the old man or his tone, which in any case becomes calm and friendly again when he says, "I've got the sheriff's number around here somewhere. That'll be the fastest thing."

He passes Alana and begins to rifle around behind the counter, but after a minute or two he looks up. "You know you're one lucky lady. Lotta folks go into that woods but I've never seen a one of 'em come out."

"There's men up there," Alana tells him. "A couple of boys, too. There's something wrong with them."

"You run into 'em, huh?"

Alana tells him, almost against her will, of what happened. The words flow out like a hemorrhage, disorganized and laced with all the fear that is catching up with her now that she believes herself to have come to a place of relative safety, and when she comes to the part about the twitchy little boy with the angry eyes hacking off Frederick's head the man looks up at her again, an expression she can't quite parse on his face.

"I think I really hurt one of the big ones," she says, and the old man stops hunting through the old papers and comes out from behind the counter. "Maybe I killed him. I don't know."

"I'm going to find that number in a minute," he mutters, walking past her and into a sideroom. "I know I will."

From out of sight he calls out to Alana, "What happened then?"

"I ran."

She leaves out what Hannibal said to her. Alana is not beginning to second guess her own understanding of what he said to her and its implications, but the situation is already bizarre enough without throwing that detail into the mix.

“What are they?” Alana asks him.

“The mill shut down, near thirty years ago,” the old man tells her from the other room, “and the poison killed off all the game, and most folks around here left. There’s just one family that stayed on after all of that, and pretty soon most all their babies started coming out of their mama’s womb just as ugly as sin.”

“That was them,” Alana says. “They killed my friend.”

Through the broken window, Alana thinks she sees motion near the treeline. She stares intently.

The man’s sigh comes from closer than she would have expected.

“Those damned boys are always getting into trouble,” he says, “but a daddy’s gotta look out for his youngins.”

Alana begins to turn toward him, but then a burlap sack falls over her head, and the drawstring is pulled tight around her throat.

Chapter 16

From the darkness outside of the shed, D whispers Will's name.

Will pulls away from Hannibal. His wet eyes twitch frantically back and forth from Soney's body and Hannibal's face.

"He can't see that," Will hisses, and Hannibal inclines his head in agreement and stands swiftly, ignoring all of the little groans and sharp screams of protest that his body makes in response.

In the long term it will probably be impossible to keep D from putting together at least some of the pieces, but for a number of reasons now is not the time, and he pulls a stray tarp down from one of the shelves and spreads it over the body while Will calls out, "It's alright," and wipes the last of the tears from his eyes.

They slip through the shed door, Will first and then Hannibal directly behind him, and Hannibal makes sure that the door latches correctly and then gets both boys walking towards the house by heading briskly in that direction himself.

Behind him, D whispers to Will, "I heard yelling."

"I know it, but everything is okay now."

"Did you turn him loose?"

"Yeah," Will tells him, and Hannibal is gratified to note that he doesn't sound too glum about it.

"Where's everybody else at?"

"Don't worry about that right now," Will tells him.

D is silent for a few moments, and Hannibal wonders if the boy is troubled by the vagueness of Will's answer, but then as though he's just remembered something important he calls out, "Hey, Hannibal!" excitedly.

The boy stumbles over two thirds of the sounds that make up Hannibal's name, muddling the fricative /h/ and losing the consonant at the end in the shuffle, and in that mispronunciation he hears the echo of another child who could not quite contend with his name either.

'Anniba, he hears, echoing against the inside of his skull for perhaps the millionth time, endearingly indifferent to the imperfection with which she rendered the word for what he was.

There is packed snow under his boots, a swing hanging from a tree that is older than generations, and Mischa giggling her version of his name as he pushes her higher and higher,

the thrilled cry of *'Anniba!* echo through forests that were ancient when Hannibal's great grandfather was still a boy.

Then there is crying in the dark, close by but somewhere that Hannibal can never reach.

'Anniba!

Repeating, building to a high scream and then fading into nothingness, into a figment that only he can hear, whether he wants to or not.

The association does not take Hannibal by surprise - he is not lacking in self-introspection, and has already noted certain commonalities between Will's situation with his little brother and his own early efforts to guide and protect Mischa - but the emotional impact of the thing is stunning.

He hesitates, though only briefly, to reassure himself that his face is under his own command, before turning to see what D wants.

Hannibal must again make a special effort to hide his expression when he sees the bottle of LaCroix that D is holding out for him.

That Will is watching Hannibal closely and evaluating his responses, even now that he has committed to leaving this place behind, is a fact of which Hannibal is acutely aware.

And, regardless of all else, Hannibal knows that his body has been taxed to the furthest limits of its resources in a way and to a degree that it has not been since he was younger than Will is now, and that they aren't out of the woods yet.

He needs the fluids, so he drinks, and pretends to enjoy it, crafting a counterfeit grateful expression that he hopes is at least more authentic-seeming than the chemical burn of the artificial sweetener and faux fruit flavor.

There were subtle signs, after Hannibal rose from hugging Will, of the pain that he was in. Now, Will clocks the little hitches in Hannibal's movements as he lets the Prius down from the tow truck's wrench and unhooks it, a tendency to bend at the knees rather than flex his belly, and a favoring of the arm from which Wasco flayed a long strip of skin.

These tells mean something to Will.

He'd thought, when he discovered Hannibal still alive but barely reactive to the hurts that Wasco and Soncy were laying on him, that Hannibal must be immune to pain in the same way as Will's uncles.

Now though, he understands that Hannibal is no less sensitive than Will himself, but only better at hiding the pain and working through it; that the arrow shaft that still protrudes from his side and all Hannibal's other injuries affect Hannibal in the same way that just looking at those wounds affects Will.

Hannibal undoes the chain suspending the Prius, and the front wheels of the car thump down onto the dry dirt. Rather late, Will remembers that Alana was the one driving, and he says miserably, “What about the keys?”

Hannibal reaches into his pocket and pulls the key fob out. He presses a button, and the Prius chirps and its headlights flash.

He took them off her before he scared her away, Will realizes, and wonders how many other eventualities Hannibal has already planned on.

“We leaving?”

“Momentarily,” Hannibal tells him. “If there’s anything you want to take with you, go get it now.”

Will is about to tell Hannibal that there is nothing that either of them need, but then he thinks again. “Alright,” he says, and takes D’s hand before turning for the house.

“One other thing,” Hannibal says, and Will looks back at him. “I need a pair of pruning shears or wire cutters. A sharp set of scissors will do if you don’t have either of the others.”

“Alright,” Will says again, and leads D quickly into the house.

Once the door is closed behind them, Will turns to face D.

Muscle memory tells him to hunker down to look D in the eyes, the same way Will used to when D was small and Will had something important to tell him, but D is too big for that now.

He’s getting so big so fast, Will thinks. He wonders if Wasco felt the same way, watching his brothers grow like oak trees, then realizes it wouldn’t have been the same for him; Wasco was the baby of the family, and Jed and Sonsy must have been giants in his eyes before he was even old enough to wobble after them.

At some point Will’s uncles moved Fredrick’s body off the kitchen table, but no one has made any effort to clean up the blood, and D can’t stop staring at it.

He takes D by the wrists, and he pulls his eyes away from the blood long enough to look back at Will. Though eye contact has always been a challenge to Will, he looks D in the eyes now, holding his gaze to make sure he has his brother’s full attention.

“Listen,” Will tells him. “We’re going to leave here with Hannibal, in just a few minutes, and we aren’t ever going to come back.”

He watches D mouth “Not coming back?” barely vocalizing the words, and he watches the way they make D’s face crack open in wonderment.

But then he becomes uncertain, and troubled D says, “But he’s a stranger.”

So are you, Will thinks. *I wish to hell I was too.*

Will is aware that Hannibal might be listening from outside, so he answers in the language that his uncles used among themselves.

“He only looks like a stranger. He's just like us, really, on the inside. You can't see it by looking at him, but he's one of us.”

All of their toys are up in the junkyard or squirreled away in the fire tower, and Will has written them off as a lost cause. There's only one thing here that he wants, and he goes to the bookcase and takes the photo album down and tucks it under his arm, before gesturing for D to follow him back outside.

Will changes his mind at the threshold.

“Wait out here,” he tells D, and steps back inside.

He goes back into the kitchen and then opens the photo album, being careful to avoid dirtying the cover with any of the surrounding filth.

Flipping to a familiar page in the book, Will finds the last family portrait that anyone took before his Mama died - Jed and Soncy and Wasco and Will still in swaddling clothes in his Mama's arms.

Will takes the picture out carefully, then hangs it on the refrigerator with a magnet, where Wasco will be sure to find it.

He glanced down the hall, to the closed bedroom door behind which he is almost certain Jed's body lies.

Will doesn't want to see that - doesn't want to see any of this anymore, ever again - so he turns away, and pausing only long enough to snatch a pair of kitchen shears from the knife block, he goes back outside.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I want to thank everyone who has read, kudos'd and especially commented so far. I know that this isn't the expected type of story for this (or really, any) fandom, so I'm so grateful to everyone who gave it a shot and who was stuck with it so far.

I'm pleased to let you all know that there's going to be a second story in this universe! More on as we draw closer to the end...

They come back outside to see Hannibal leaning over the open front door of the Prius, backlit by the car's interior lighting.

Circling around, Will sees that Hannibal has opened the first aid kit that D brought back from the junkyard, and is studying its contents while he works on unbuttoning the last of the little buttons that line the front of his shirt.

Will wonders why he didn't just rip the buttons loose. The shirt is already in tatters, and when Will sees that Hannibal is trying to shrug it off he reaches up and helps the best he can.

When the blood-stained, ruined shirt falls away Will gets a better view of many of the bruises and burns and cuts that Hannibal has acquired today. He stares at the feathered end of the arrow shaft that still protrudes from Hannibal's back, sticking out just above the hip bone, to the far left of his spine. A thick trail of rust-colored drying blood stems from the wound, though it's only bleeding a little now.

Will stares at it, sick. "Are you going to take it out?" he asks.

"Not here," Hannibal says. "I'm almost positive that it didn't hit anything serious, but there's a chance that the wound might bleed more than is convenient were I to remove it now. The risk of infection would be considerably increased as well.

"But I do need to be able to sit down to drive. You have the shears?"

Will holds them up for Hannibal to see.

"Good. Hold onto them for a minute," he tells Will, and leans over the first aid kit again.

"This is an excellent kit," he tells the two of them, looking at D as he says it.

Unsure what to do with the praise, D fidgets and stares down at his sneakers.

What Will is feeling is more complicated; he can remember the couple that he took that first aid kit from. Their kids hadn't been traveling with them, but there were signs of the children in the car, a warm red hoodie in the trunk and crayons and a half-used coloring book in the backseat, and there was such a resentment in Will at all of that that was only multiplied when he found the fancy first aid kit, more evidence that these absent children enjoyed parents who put thought into making sure that they were safe and provided for, and so much shame at having taken that away from them.

He'd given D the red hoodie, and he'd worn it until it was rust brown with dirt and stains and didn't fit him anymore, but that did little to blunt Will's sense of guilt, a feeling that was tied up in the fear that he'd done something similar to D - that he'd helped to steal from D parents that might have loved him right and well.

"Watch how I do this," Hannibal tells Will, and he takes a disinfectant wipe from its packaging and begins to scrub his hands. Hannibal repeats this process three times in succession, using a new wipe each time. Then he takes the shears from Will, gripping them between the tips of two fingers, and gives Will some of the wipes so he can disinfect his own hands while Hannibal cleans the shears.

Will gets busy scrubbing his hands the way Hannibal showed him. He is not ignorant to the concept of germs, though the daily difficulties of braving the worn down filth that surrounds himself and D combine with his limited education on the topic to create in his mind a picture of germs as an omnipresent and omnipotent power that might choose to behave maliciously, if given the opportunity. He envisions some small grain of dirt, overlooked beneath his nails or in the crease between his two fused fingers, transferring to Hannibal and getting inside him to make him ill - eating him alive from the inside out - simply to spite Will's hopes for escape.

Will is glad all over again that D brought the first aid kit back from the junkyard on his own initiative, but he watches anxiously as Hannibal locks the shears around the shaft of the arrow, perhaps an inch out from where it protrudes from his body, and tightens the blade.

The cut section of the arrow shaft drops to the ground, and Hannibal holds the shears out to Will.

"I'll need you to do the same on the other end," he tells him. "Don't cut it against the skin, please, leave a short length protruding, as I did just now."

Will does his best to avoid hurting Hannibal, but he's not strong enough to cut through the wood in one smooth snip as Hannibal did. Hannibal hisses the air out between his teeth, once, when Will shifts the blades around the groove he's already made squeezes again, but he doesn't cry out.

"You alright?" Will asks, pointlessly, when he finally manages to cut all the way through the arrow. The bleeding has gone from a slow drip to a steady trickle, and Will is afraid that he's caused some new harm.

"I'll be fine," Hannibal says, but he's pallid and there's sheen of sweat on his skin and he's breathing too hard. He lowers himself gingerly down onto the edge of the driver's seat. "Just

talk with me for a few minutes.”

“I don’t know what to talk about.”

“Tell me what happened when you broke your leg.”

“Just a stupid accident,” Will says, evasive.

“Wasco did it,” D says, startling Will.

He’d been so focused on the arrow and on following Hannibal’s directions about what to do about it that he’d almost forgotten that D was there, but now Will looks toward the sound of his voice.

D is back near the rear of the car, and his face is bathed in the shadows, his eyes dark, and yet Will can see the anger in him. It’s a different kind of anger from Will’s own.... flat, somehow, instead of the churning turmoil that Will’s lived with every minute of every day since before he can remember, and that difference worries Will because he doesn’t know what to do about it.

“It was an accident,” Will repeats, unsure of who he is trying to convince. “Wasco was showing me how to climb trees - he’s real good at climbing trees, he goes right up them like a squirrel - and I was getting good at it too and I was having a good time so I said, ‘Let’s race!’”

Wasco laughed at the idea, agreeable and excited, but Wasco didn’t play fair. Wasco snatched at his ankle when Will outpaced him, and then when Will wiggled free and kept going Wasco started to move back and forth to make the tree sway.

The more pliant, smaller branches that Will was hanging on to bent easily under the shaking, and Will yelped and held on for dear life but the tree just rocked harder, and maybe Wasco couldn’t even hear Will’s breathless and frantic pleading under the sound of his own hilarious laughter.

Wasco was still cackling when Will fell, and the sound of that laughter followed Will down as he crashed through the smaller branches and banged against the big ones, and then he hit the ground. There was a fleeting second in which Will saw D, who’d been playing with some toy cars nearby, running towards him, and then a quiet blackness over took him.

Will doesn’t know how long he was unconscious, but when he came to Wasco was crouched over him, shaking Will by the shoulder while he giggled nervously, and when he tried to pull Will to his feet the broken bones in his leg ground together and Will screamed and screamed until there wasn’t any breath left in him.

“The screaming scared Wasco so badly that he ran off,” Will says, and tries to pin a short laugh on the end of that, to find something funny in the entire ugly business. It sounds bitter, even in his own ears. “He’s never seemed to be able to remember how easy it is to hurt me, or to know what to do when he did.

“All three of them are like that,” he adds, watching his tenses for D’s sake.

“I didn’t think anyone was going to come back for us,” D adds, and at least now he only sounds worried and wounded by past problems, not angry in the strange way he sometimes gets.

“Yeah,” Will agrees, ducking his head. “I didn’t think you remembered any of this,” he admits. “You were still real little.”

“I remember.”

Hannibal reaches for a thick roll of gauze. Moving stiffly, he begins to wrap it around his middle.

Will chews on his lower lip as he watches him, sees the way the red blood that still dribbles from the reopened scabs dyes the cotton red. “You need help with that?”

“I’ve got it,” Hannibal tells him. “What happened after that?”

“Wasco came back with Soncy and Jed, and Jed picked me up.”

Will doesn’t tell either of them how scared he was when he saw them come towards him through the trees, the way his heart pounded when Jed loomed over Will before bending to pick him up. He was rough, and when Will screamed it was from fear as well as pain, because all Will could think was that they’d finally broken him, like they broke all their human toys, and that they were done with him, and the only reason they’d come back to fetch him because they didn’t want to let good food go to waste.

“He hurt me by mistake and I yelled,” Will says instead.

“He’d gotten kinda confused, I think, and picked me up like he was just picking up a... bag of corn,” Will goes on. ‘Dead body’ was what Will wanted to say, of course, and that was what it felt like for a few seconds there - like Jed was just there to do a piece of heavy lifting for his brother. “After I yelled, Jed remembered that it was me, and he remembered that he cared about me and didn’t want to hurt me, so he was a lot more careful. He said, ‘It’s okay, Will, I’ve got you,’ and he carried me down to the truck.”

“The truck?”

“Yeah. They drove me down to my Papaw’s place. You seen the gas station on your way up here?”

Hannibal nods, thoughtfully.

“They took me down to him because they wanted to get him to take me to a doctor. That’s what Wasco wanted to do especially.”

Will remembers laying in the back of the pickup bed, his head propped up on a greasy pillow while Jed petted his hair to try to help him calm down, and how that only made it all worse

but not having the heart or the guts to tell Jed to stop, while Wasco tried to make his case to Maynard.

“Wasco tried asking and arguing and begging, but none of it did a thing to sway my Papaw, and before very long he got tired of listening to Wasco and just laid in on him.”

“He beat him?” Hannibal asks.

“Yeah. Eventually. First he used his words on him.

“I don’t remember a lot of what Maynard said,” Will lies. He could repeat it, probably word for word, if he tried, but the idea of trying that makes him sick. “Just that it was Wasco’s fault for being foolish and messing around, and he wasn’t going to waste his time cleaning up our mess - wasn’t going to spend his hard earned money or risk bringing the law down on the family just because Wasco didn’t have any goddamned common sense.”

“The indifference hit you hard.”

“I didn’t *want* to go see any doctor anyway,” Will says, flaring to anger. “Even back then I knew that would just get the police involved, and then they’d take D -

“They’d take D and me away, is what I mean,” Will adds quickly. “And Wasco knew that too, I guess, but he *wanted* to help. They all three wanted to get me help but they just didn’t know *how*, and a big part of the reason that they don’t know how to be around normal people is *because* of Maynard, but despite everything they knew they thought if they went to their Daddy and asked him to make it better he’d at least *try*, but instead -”

Will doesn’t want to talk about what happened instead, doesn’t want to tell Hannibal - or D, who’d been left behind at the house while the family went down to the gas station - the way Maynard berated Wasco until he was absolutely nothing, until his appeasing giggles turned into moans and he’d started gnawing at his own fingers in distress, and how when Wasco found enough will to suddenly break out from under the abuse and lunged at Maynard he’d knocked Wasco flat and kept pounding on him until Soncy put his own body between Maynard and his brother and took the rest of the beating for him.

“None of them are easy to hurt,” Will says instead, “but their Daddy knows how to hurt them bad, inside and out.”

Will fidgets, suddenly feeling like Maynard’s eyes are on him, though the old man is without a doubt asleep in the backroom of his gas station.

Hannibal is pinning down the end of the gauze he’s wrapped around his middle. Without looking up he says, “It was your grandfather, wasn’t it, that hit upon the idea of using you for bait?”

“Can we leave now?” Will says, evasive and anxious and exhausted. “I’m ready to leave. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“I’m ready now,” Hannibal says.

They leave it all behind, the three of them, the rotting house and the shed with all its ropes and rust-dulled instruments and the auto necropolis at the top of the hill, but Maynard and Wasco aren't far behind.

Chapter 18

It would have been different if the woman and her man were targets that the family worked together to lure in and overcome, but the sudden discovery of dangerous strangers in their mist has unnerved Wasco.

There is a distinction between setting out to hunt a wildcat, well armed and with the support of your brothers and a pack of hunting dogs (and never mind that neither wildcats nor dogs have been able to survive on the mountain in his lifetime) versus discovering the same wildcat lurking inside your own home, ready to maul you and your kin.

That he and his own have inflected similar feelings of horrified bafflement and object terror on countless others is not a fact with which Wasco is prepared to contend. He can no more practice the required introspection than scar tissue can blush.

The only people who are fully real to him are his brothers and the boys. Maynard's realness is reflected primarily in his ability to ruthlessly rule over Wasco and his siblings with a hard fist.

Now, Wasco is hesitant to enter the gas station, though the woman's trail - broken twigs on bushes and small tree branches that she pushed her way through, shoe prints in the dirt and ground litter and gravel - clearly lead to Maynard's front door. But he goes anyway, marginally more frightened of the repercussions of failing to do than of the alternative, and perhaps the last vestige of the child he once was hopes that his father might somehow yet deign to fix what has gone wrong.

Maynard is just finishing tying the woman up when Wasco comes inside, and when he sees the stranger slumped over in the chair with the burlap bag tied over her head he thinks about Jed and the dent that she put in his thick skull, and Wasco wants to hurt her, and not in the gleeful, happy-go-lucky way he normally approaches the destruction of outsiders.

No, he wants to *punish cut her up eat her alive* for what she did to his big brother, but when Wasco reaches out for her Maynard slaps his hands away.

"Don't fuss with that," he says.

The blow didn't hurt - perilously little has ever caused Wasco physical pain - but it and the words invoke in Wasco a sense of childish helpless hurt, and feeling tears sting his eyes he pushes the hair back from his face and looks up at Maynard from under the curl of his hump and says, "She killed Jed."

"That so?" Maynard says, and there is snake venom in his voice, but not for the stranger. "And you lost track of her and let her make it all the way down here, huh?"

Wasco cringes away from his anger and says, "I'd've caught her myself in a minute."

Maynard raises his fist at even that small scrap of defiance, and Wasco covers his face and says, “*I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry*,” the words slurring together into a high-pitched sing-song whine, and when Maynard only shoves him away in disgust rather than laying in with his fists, Wasco finds the courage to peer out from behind his gnarled fingers and repeat again, “But she killed Jed. He’s dead.”

Maynard doesn’t justify that with even a vague response this time. Instead, he begins to berate Wasco for failing to protect the homeplace and his brothers, and for showing his ugly face at the gas station, and for losing track of the woman.

The anger in his voice rouses the woman, who lifts her head and turns it to the left and then to the right in bafflement from behind the fuzzy blindness of the burlap cowl. Maynard shakes her by the shoulders like a terrier with a rat, and Wasco backs further away lest Maynard unleash similar violence upon him even as the jealous desire to use his own hands on her pounds where his heart ought to be.

“Do you have any conception of what would have happened if she’d made it off the mountain?” Maynard demands, and when the nervous giggles force their way out from between Wasco’s teeth Maynard bellows, “You clumsy fucking abomination, are you trying to get us all put away?”

Wasco doesn’t dare to answer, and disgusted Maynard hauls the woman to her feet and shoves her at Wasco, who by reflex catches her by the shoulders of her muddied sweater.

“Take her out to the truck and put her in the back,” he tells Wasco, and when he only stares, gap-mouthed, at his father, Maynard says dangerously, “You’d best jump sharp,” and the threat gets Wasco moving to do what he’s been told.

By then the woman has almost entirely rejoined the waking world. It’s hard piece of work, getting her out to the truck with her fighting him every step of the way, and when Wasco lifts her off her feet to carry her the rest of the way she beats at his hump with her wound wrists and tries to kick him.

Wasco has always had his brothers to do this kind of heavy lifting from him, and as he struggles to force the woman into the covered pickup truck bed and then slams the gate after her he remembers all over again that Jed is gone for good.

The grief of that sets off an anxious itching in the back of his brain to meet up with Soncy again. Soncy has always looked after him, and Wasco’s limbs twitch with impatience for the entire ride back up the mountain, so eager is he to reassure himself that Soncy and the boys are alright.

But when Wasco returns to the shed, hurrying up the hill ahead of Maynard in his eagerness, Soncy isn’t there.

Neither is the man they tied up out there to cut on and hurt, and more terrifyingly there is no sign of the boys.

He looks around the shed, mystified, and feels his guts turn over sickly when he notices something big laying on the ground in the corner, covered by an old tarp.

Instead of approaching that lumpy form, Wasco raises his fused fingers to his mouth and gnaws at them miserably, in a way that he hasn't since he was very small. In other circumstances the taste of blood might have rewarded him with some degree of comfort, but it does him no good now, and he backs away from the truth beneath that tarp.

When Maynard steps into the shed he catches Wasco by the back of his curled neck and yanks him back inside too. Quickly he takes stock of the situation, and then he strides on and bends to grab the tarp and jerk it up and off the thing that it was hiding.

The sense of unreality that overtook Wasco when Jed breathed his last shuddering breath returns, multiplied, when he sees Soncy's body lying there, purple-faced and lifeless, and the screeching howl that comes out of his throat hurts Wasco's own ears but he is powerless to stop it.

Maynard knocks him to the ground with an open-handed blow across the face, and instead of trying to climb back to his feet Wasco stays where he is, slumped over on the dirt floor. He raises his fingers to his mouth and starts to chew again, and the blood dribbles down his chin as Maynard looks down on him and says, "I've never seen anything so disgusting," and then spits on the dirt beside Wasco's knee.

Revolted, Maynard turns away from Wasco to examine the ropes where they'd hung the stranger up by his arms.

"He didn't wiggle out or undo the knots," Maynard says. "This was cut. One of the boys turned him loose."

Maynard looks over his shoulder at Wasco. "Bet you anything it was that ugly little foundling," he says, almost conversationally. "You never should have let Will keep it."

Wasco doesn't believe any of that, but a lifetime of experience tells him how bad an idea it is to argue with Maynard, and he waits until the old man's back is to him before shaking his own head in denial.

When Maynard is ready to go Wasco follows him down to the truck and gets in, ignoring the muffled complaints from the back, but now his intentions are different than they were before.

He still means to have his revenge on both of the strangers, but this is about more than that now.

Now it is a rescue mission, and he means to get his boys back.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Couple quick notes:

The chapter count bounced up because I've decided to extend this story past where it was originally going to end, so we get a chance to see more of what happens in the aftermath of the current crisis.

There's also likely a sequel in the work, of which I won't say much now except that it features Hannibal contending with a stalker and Home Alone-style cappers.

They are on the dirt road for only a few minutes before D sprawls out in the backseat and promptly falls asleep.

Will is in the front seat, next to Hannibal, and he would like nothing more than to allow himself to do the same, but he's too hyped up.

He's hungry, too. The last thing he ate was the nutrition bar he stole from Fredrich, and so much has happened in the last eighteen or so hours that feels like a lifetime ago. The meat sticks he pocketed shortly after meeting Hannibal fell out at some point along the way, and are long gone by now, but he thinks about the ones he left in the container under the back seat.

But he doesn't ask Hannibal about them. Will has been beaten for complaining about hunger in the past, and has little reason to believe that Hannibal won't get ugly with him now if Will distracts him.

Hannibal looks to be even closer to the edge than Will himself feels, and in the dawn light Will watches his sallow face closely, trying to see what lies beneath it, and hoping the man won't black out and take them off the road. Hannibal might have offered the chance to leave the mountain for something potentially better, but nothing in Will's realm of experience means that negates the possibility for adult violence.

But Will's stomach gives him away. When the grumbling starts, Will puts his hands over his belly, as though to muffle the sound, but Hannibal's head turns to look at him anyway.

He slows the car to a stop, and reaches around to take the snack box out from under the back seat. Hannibal holds it out for Will.

Will hesitates. "Those are yours," he says, and is betrayed by another growl from his stomach.

“I want you to have them,” and holds the box out until Will can’t resist any longer.

Will takes one of the meat sticks from the container, and bites into it, and all of a sudden he knows.

Hannibal sees him knowing.

“Does it trouble you?” he asks quietly.

Will swallows hard. “Are you going to hurt us?” he asks, with the same tone and inflection that Hannibal just used.

“I’ve no intention of eating either one of you.”

“Then no, it doesn’t.” Will is learning how to read Hannibal; relief shows not on his face, but in the relaxing of the tension in the skin that overlays his throat. “What are you after?”

“I’ve already told you. I would like for you - for the both of you - to stay with me.”

“Why?”

“You are an exceptional child, Will, and are in possession of great potential.”

Will doesn’t pay much attention to that, at least not right now. There are more important things on his mind. “What about D?”

“You’ve succeeded with D where I failed, Will,” Hannibal tells him, without taking his eyes off the winding road. Will watches Hannibal in profile, tracking the little twitches of emotion that slide across his face as quickly as the flutter of a moth’s wings, charting out what sincerity looks like on his features in hopes of better understanding how to in the future recognize lies. “I couldn’t keep my own little sister alive.”

Hannibal continues on without pause, giving Will no chance to respond to that.

“I think that it would be... therapeutic for me to be able to see you seeing him growing up well. And he’s easy to like, honestly. I’d like to play a role in helping him to have a good life.

“I’m in a position to give that to you, if you want it.”

Will climbs up on his knees in the seat to look back at D, sleeping easy across the backseats.

“You don’t even know us,” he says.

“I know what you are,” Hannibal tells him.

And he does.

They are victims, and while the form of victimhood they have been subjected to is profoundly different from his own childhood traumas, Hannibal thinks that he can work with that.

Will has opened his mouth to reply to that when behind them a twin pair of bright pinpricks of light come into view.

“Headlights,” Will says, as his weary heart begins to pound again.

“I see them,” Hannibal answers, and steps on the accelerator.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

CW in this one for the use of what is generally considered by people with cleft plates to be a slur.

D is still asleep in the backseat, and Will yells his name to wake him up and reaches over the seat to pull at his arm.

Hannibal says, “Seat belts,” in grim warning, and Will glances out the review window and sees the truck gaining on them. It is close enough that in the early dawn light he can see Maynard behind the wheel, and his expression is enough to fill Will’s veins with ice water.

His brother is not unaccustomed to surprise wake up calls, and he comes to confused and already prepared to be frightened, but very quickly he blinks the sleep from his eyes and focuses on Will for directions.

Will, who is still kneeling backwards in the front seat, tells him, “Buckle up!” and D tries to do as he’s told but he’s almost never been inside a moving car, and he struggles with the strap and the belt, trying to figure out what to do, and the pickup is still gaining on them despite how fast Hannibal is driving, and frantic Will climbs into the gap between the front and back to take the buckle from D, and is rewarded with the click as it locks into place just as Hannibal says “ *Will* ,” sharply, and Will has just slid back into his own seat and is reaching for the seatbelt when when the truck hits them the first time.

Tires squeal as Hannibal fights to keep the them on the road, and Will glances out the side mirror while he struggles to buckle his own seatbelt as the car swerves across the narrow gravel road, and finds himself mystified by how it feels as though the truck is literally breathing down the back of his neck and by the faint text printed on the mirror glass, *Objects are closer than they appear* , and then Maynard hits them again and Will flies forward into the footwell, hitting his head hard on the dashboard in the process, and Will’s head is spinning and so is his entire world.

It seems as though the car comes to a sudden wrenching halt in the same instant that the airbags deploy, but none of that negates the nauseous dizziness that has taken over all of Will’s senses, and the taste of his own blood almost overwhelms the smell of smoke.

As though from far off, Will hears D calling his name and crying.

He gropes for the door handle, trying to get out of the car so he can go around back to D, but then as though by its own accord the door swings open.

There's a figure standing outside, but through the unfocused red haze Will can't seem work out who, and when he looks upwards the world blurs and starts to spin more violently, and -

- before the pickup truck has even come to a halt Wasco scuttles down from the passenger side and runs for the little car, which after spinning out has come to its final resting place against the great trunk of an elm tree.

When Wasco opens the passenger side door Will flops into his arms. Cradling the limp form against his own body, Wasco carries him away from the burning car and lays him down in the soft dirt by the edge of the road.

Will's face is bathed in blood, and for a long heartbeat that scares Wasco bad, but when he wipes at the boy's face with his hands he sees that it's only coming from a gash in his forehead. The wound is bleeding heavily, but in Wasco's experience no one has ever died of something like that, and even if he's unconscious Will is breathing just fine.

Wasco looks around for Maynard, expecting to see him carrying D away from the car.

Instead, the old man is standing beside his truck, leaning on his rifle while he watches the stranger pull D out of the backseat just ahead of the spreading flames.

That stranger has been a pure terror, hurting Wasco in ways that he hadn't known he could be hurt and robbing him of almost everything, but he looks just about done in now. He looks like Wasco could walk up to the stranger and cut his throat, and he wouldn't have the pep to complain about it, let alone put up a fight.

It doesn't come as a surprise when the man's legs give out from under him after he's taken only a dozen strides from the burning car. He goes down hard on his knees, but manages somehow to avoid falling on D or losing hold and throwing him.

With a degree of caution that in even the best of times would never have occurred to Wasco, the stranger stands D on his feet and lets him go. The boy takes a few uncertain steps back, looking down at the stranger, and Wasco is a heartbeat away from calling out the boy's name to bring D back to him when he hears the sound of Maynard cocking the rifle.

All of them hear it, except for Will, and as one they turned their heads towards Wasco's daddy, and -

- D tries to put himself between Maynard's gun and Hannibal.

He throws himself at Hannibal, who is still kneeling, and curls his arms around his neck as though Hannibal were a large dog to be hugged, and craning his neck around to look back at Maynard he bleats out, "Papaw - please don't hurt him!"

Maynard only warns him once.

“Get out the way,” he says, and when D shakes his head and holds on tighter while he goes on begging every last bit of his Papaw’s ugliness comes out, and he says, “You think I won’t shoot you, you pathetic little harelip? You think you mean a damn to me? You ain’t kin.”

D looks down the dark tunnel of the rifle barrel as Maynard points the barrel towards him and steps closer, and D thinks that he must be speaking because he can hear his own voice but he can’t make sense of any of the words, and he sees now in the disgusted curl of Maynard’s lips that he’s going to kill him now, and he pees without realizing he’s done it, and -

- Hannibal gets to his feet.

His reality is blurring, past and present meeting together in this moment where he places his own inadequate body between that of a child and the man which he will not be able to stop from hurting that child, but he pushes D behind him and plants his feet, and then he glares at Maynard from beneath a fringe of sweaty hair and bares his teeth.

Maynard ignores him.

All his bile is focused on the small boy that is clinging to the back of Hannibal’s leg and sobbing incoherently, and Maynard says, “You were never kin - you’re lower than a stray dog. We were only ever fattening you up, waiting on the day Will got sick of you, and I think it’s about time.”

Maynard takes another step forward, seeking a clear line of sight on D as he cowers behind Hannibal’s legs, and then suddenly an arrow blooms from Maynard’s chest.

A heart and lung shot, Hannibal observes, as blood bubbles from Maynard’s mouth.

The man’s legs give out under him, and he crumples to the ground like a puppet that’s had its strings cut. Maynard isn’t quite dead yet, but he will be within the next few minutes, and Hannibal has disregards him to look out along the path that the arrow took - to Wasco, who stands all alone with his bow in hand.

Then Hannibal’s eyes find Will, laying unmoving on the side of the road, and Hannibal forgets about everything else.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hannibal drops to his knees beside Will.

“He’s alive,” he says out loud, for D’s benefit as well as his own; when Hannibal saw him lying there he’d been badly afraid that the boy was dead.

That breaks the fear that’s held D hovering in the background, and he throws himself to the ground next to Will and shakes him by the shoulder, calling out his name.

“Careful,” Hannibal cautions, pulling D back, but Will is stirring now.

When Will sits up, mumbling D’s name as he tries to get his bearings and then curling his arms around Hannibal’s neck to cling, Wasco tries to interject.

There’s an angry bark of laughter that draws everyone’s attention back to Wasco. He gestures for the boys to come to him, and then lets out a chain of breathless giggles that carry a profound weight of dread when neither boy moves towards him.

Wasco cuts his eyes toward Hannibal, bearing his teeth and stalking closer, like a cougar trying to drive a hunter away from its cubs, and the threatening laugh he lets out has something in common with a cougar’s scream.

Will staggers to his feet, but when Wasco gestures for the boys again - more violently insistent this time - D clutches Hannibal’s hand and Will stands his ground.

“No,” Will tells him, not cruelly but with a resolve that is striking in one so young, “we aren’t going back with you.

“You did the best you could by us, maybe - I don’t know - but we can’t stay here any longer,” Will goes on. “We can’t and we don’t want to.

“This place is dead, and I don’t just mean the family. Everything here has been dead for a long time, and I’ve got to try and find a way to make a new family and a new life for D - for myself, too - while we still have a chance to do it.

“Hannibal is going to help us with that, and he’s going to look after me and D. You don’t need to worry about us.”

Wasco had been watching Will with baffled hurt, but when the boy falls silent he turns his wet eyes on Hannibal. Those eyes are full of blame, and what lurks behind them is no less dangerously volatile than before, and the man’s free hand twitches towards the quiver on his back, and for a long moment it seems clear to Hannibal that he is going to die today after all.

Then he drops the bow, and gnawing anxiously on his already bleeding fingers he scuttles over to Maynard's body. Without any care or reverence he turns it over to dig through the old man's pockets, coming up with a set of keys.

His face is wet as he strides towards Hannibal with a strange and surprising kind of dignity, and he isn't laughing now.

"Thank you," Hannibal says, when Wasco hands over the keys.

He shrugs with one twisted shoulder, indifferent both to the praise and the effort at making a connection, and dismisses Hannibal from his attention.

Wasco looks down at the boys, one last time, before walking away. He ruffles Will's hair as he passes them by, and Hannibal watches the way Will winces in pain at the touch and then grit his teeth and try to keep the pain inside so Wasco won't notice it. Always too rough, always hurting the boy in some way, whether or not he means to, right down to the last.

Will watches Wasco's hunched shoulders bob up and down as he walks away, and then he looks back at the still-burning car, where the photo album sits lost somewhere among the flames, and on sudden impulse he calls out, "Wait!"

Wasco pauses and turns to face him, but he doesn't walk back in Will's direction.

He makes Will walk to him, and Will is aware of the danger even as he splits off from D and Hannibal and does just that, limping under the weight of a hundred different aches until he is just close enough to speak clearly with him.

In a different life, Will might have closed the remaining gap between them, came closer for a goodbye hug or a reassuring pat on the back, but Will knows from long experience not to get too close when Wasco is emotionally compromised, and right now his last remaining uncle is contending with what must be the worst day of his life.

Instead, he keeps his distance and says, "You should leave too. Go somewhere else - further up the mountain and back into the woods, *anywhere* but here. The police are bound to come looking, and soon."

Wasco shakes his head, stubborn and resigned. "You two go on," he says. "I'll mind the homeplace."

And they do, the three of them climbing painfully up into the pickup truck and heading back on the road, but they haven't gone half a mile before Will hears something thumping around in the back, under the truck bed cover.

D is already halfway asleep, draped halfway across Will's lap as he sinks further off into a haze of absolute mental and physical exhaustion, and he doesn't notice the sound, but Will cuts his eyes towards Hannibal and sees that he heard it too.

When Hannibal pulls over and gingerly steps down from the cab, D stirs a little. “We there?” he slurs sleepily, his eyes fluttering open.

“Not yet,” Will tells him. “You can see sleep a while longer.”

But he’s awake now, though Will doesn’t think for long, and he sits up and rubs at his eyes and says, a little worriedly, “What’s going on?”

Will isn’t completely sure, but he has a good idea; Through the side mirror he can see that Hannibal has opened the hatch, though he can’t see exactly what Hannibal is doing with his hands back there. His mouth is moving in a way that looks like talking, but Will can’t hear what he’s saying either.

“It’s alright,” he tells D, and doesn’t elaborate.

After a few minutes Hannibal gets back into the truck. He responds to Will’s questioning look with a sad shake of his head.

“They had Alana back there.”

"She dead?"

"Oh yes."

It doesn’t scare Will the way it might have if he hadn’t already figured out how different Hannibal’s feelings for D and himself are from those he held for the woman.

"Better that way, I guess," Will says. "She would have told."

“Everything that’s happened here is just about over,” Hannibal tells them. “The police will have to be called. The authorities will step in and scrutinize what role we held in what happened.

“If we are to stay together, we will need a consistent storyline.”

The boys listen closely as Hannibal tells them what they need to do.

Chapter End Notes

This is where I originally planned to end the story, but let's go a little further...

Chapter 22

Chapter by [PragmaticHominid](#)

Hi everybody.

So, after further thought and... an excessive amount of time outlining, I have reached two conclusions.

1.) The previous chapter was in fact the natural end point of this particular story,

and

2.) This AU should actually be a three part series.

And so - Chapter One of the Part II, "Wolf Creek Lodge," can be found at the [Link!](#)

Thanks again to everyone who gave this ~~story~~ series a shot and to everyone who has read, kudos and/or commented so far!

If you are interested in a little bit of audience participation, feel free to visit me on twitter and vote in this [poll](#). I can't SWEAR that the story will follow the will of the voters, but I will make a better good faith effort to do so than certain sore loser ex-presidents that I won't name here.

Much love,

Pragg

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!